Knowledge from Non-Knowledge in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: A Dialogue

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ABSTRACT: Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* presents a view according to which all knowledge rests on commitments to things we do not know. In his usual manner, Wittgenstein does not present a clearly defined set of reasons to support this view. Instead, the reasons emerge along with the view itself through a series of often cryptic remarks. But this does not prevent us from critically assessing the position (or positions) one finds in the work. This paper attempts to do that in the form of a philosophical dialogue. The challenges to Wittgenstein's view raised here center on: the extent to which hinge commitments can plausibly be regarded as rules of a language-game rather than rationally assessable propositions, mutual support versus bottom up notions of justification, the subject and context relativity of hinge commitments, the difference between justification and persuasion, whether propositions of the form p is hinge are themselves hinge, and the general viability of Wittgenstein's view as an alternative to epistemological skepticism and Moorean anti-skepticism.

A groggy hospital patient awakens to find someone seated in a chair next to his bed.

Patient: Man, I got a headache. What do they use for anesthesia in this place? Goldschläger? Wonder how my surgery went. At least there's a TV in here. This should be a good game.

LW: This game proves its worth. That may be the cause of its being played, but it is not the ground. (473)[1]

P: That'd be my strategy too. Don't even think of running the ball against that D-line. Air game is gonna be key. I'm skeptical they can pull out a win but I'm glad I got somebody to watch it with. What's your name anyway, buddy?

LW.: My name is "L.W." And if someone were to dispute it, I should straightaway make connexions with innumerable things that make it certain. (594)

P: I wasn't planning on disputing it. But if you're gonna be that way, I'm game. Tell you what: I don't think anything's certain. You may think your name's L.W. but there's lots of ways you could be wrong. Maybe there was some sort of mix-up with your birth certificate and people have been calling you L.W. when your real name is Steve. Why couldn't that happen? And why couldn't it be what's happening right now?

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[1] Throughout this dialogue, all of L.W.'s contributions are direct quotations from *On Certainty*, trans. Anscombe and von Wright (New York: Basil Blackwell 1969). Remarks are cited by paragraph number.

LW: "But I can still imagine someone making all these connexions, and none of them corresponding with reality. Why shouldn't I be in a similar case?" If I imagine such a person I also imagine a reality, a world that surrounds him; and I imagine him as thinking and speaking in contradiction to this world. (595)

P: You're begging the question there, L-Dub. The whole issue is whether the world I'm describing is in contradiction to this one or identical to it.

LW: It is part of the language-game with people's names that everyone knows his name with the greatest certainty. (579)

P: Ah, so it's not just that a world where your name's not L.W. would be different from this world. It's that anyone living that world would be speaking a whole 'nother language. But why's that? The language is way older than you. How could it be a rule of our language that your name's L.W.?

LW: When we say "Certain propositions must be excluded from doubt", it sounds as if I ought to put these propositions - for example, that I am called L.W. - into a logic-book. For if it belongs to the description of a language-game, it belongs to logic. But that I am called L.W. does not belong to any such description. The language-game that operates with people's names can certainly exist even if I am mistaken about my name, - but it does presuppose that it is nonsensical to say that the majority of people are mistaken about their names. (628)

P: Ah, so now it's not the particular fact—if it is fact—that your name's L.W. that's a rule of the language or "language game" as you like to call it. It's this more general fact that most people are not mistaken about their names—which allows that *you* could be. Sounds like you're backpedaling from what you said earlier but I'll let that slide. In any case, why couldn't there be a world where there are rampant undetected birth certificate mixups and it turns out most people are wrong about their own names? And couldn't people in that world still speak the same language we do? So how can it be a rule of our language that most people are not wrong about their names?

L.W.: You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it. (501)

P: We talking 'bout practice? *Practice?* Not a game? But alright, sure. The way we go about our everyday business with language assumes we're not wrong about our own names. But how does that answer my question? Just because we tend to assume something doesn't mean it's true or that we know it.

L.W.: "Do you know or do you only believe that your name is L.W.?" Is that a meaningful question? Do you know or do you only believe that what you are writing down now are German words? Do you only believe that "believe" has this meaning? What meaning? (486)

P: You're expecting me to write this down? I just got out of surgery. But yeah, those sound like good questions to me. So what?

LW: For months I have lived at address A, I have read the name of the street and the number of the house countless times, have received countless letters here and given countless people the address. If I am wrong about it, the mistake is hardly less than if I were (wrongly) to believe I was writing Chinese and not German. (50)

P: Hold on. Languages are defined by vocabulary and syntax. Except in trick cases like "I am now speaking German," the question of what language a statement is in is completely different from the question of whether it's true. Being wrong about your name or address or something like that isn't on the same level as being wrong about what language you're speaking. But even so, why couldn't we be wrong about that too? Yeah, it seems like we're speaking German to each other here. But suppose the doctors at this place secretly implanted *Star Trek* universal translator devices into our ear canals and we're really speaking English but the device makes it sound to us like we are speaking German. I guess there'd have to be some kind of holographic projection device that makes it look like the lips are synced up. But I guess that's it how it works on *Star Trek*. Anyway, how can you be so sure that's not happening to us right now?

LW: I have a right to say "I can't be making a mistake about this" even if I am in error. (663) But that does not mean that I am infallible about it. (425)

P: You got a right to say what you want. Free country. But what difference does that make? I wanna know what we should *think*. If you give me that it is possible your name isn't L.W.—and it sounds like you are giving me that when you say you're not infallible—why should you *be* certain even if you have a right to *say* you are? Sure, you gotta walk before you run and you gotta talk before you can think but that doesn't mean—Oooh! You see that hit? He laid that safety out! And they were nowhere near the play. The set's muted but you can bet the announcers are going on about how wrong that was even though there won't be a penalty because that's legal. You see? Just because something is permitted by the rules of the game doesn't mean it's something you should do—even though there's a sense in which you have a "right" to do it. The same goes for language-games and epistemology. Even if the rules of the language-game give you a right to *claim* to be certain about your name, that doesn't mean you're epistemically justified in being certain about it. And even if playing the game *requires* you to believe the proposition that your name's L.W., that just pushes the problem back a step. "Am I epistemically justified in believing my name is L.W.?" becomes "Am I epistemically justified in doing what it takes to play this game?"

LW: I cannot be making a mistake about 12x12 being 144. And now one cannot contrast mathematical certainty with the relative uncertainty of empirical propositions. For the mathematical proposition has been obtained by a series of actions that are in no way different from the actions of the rest of our lives, and are in the same degree liable to forgetfulness, oversight and illusion. (651)

P: Nobody told me there was gonna be math. But I think I get what you're driving at. Simple mathematical truths are supposed to be "analytic" in the sense that they're made true by the meanings of the terms. And that's supposed to be what makes them so obvious and certain. So here's a case where you might say mere proficiency with the language—simply understanding the meanings of '12' and 'times' and so on—in some sense commits you to treating '12x12 = 144' as absolutely certain. And then you wanna say that there are empirical propositions that work the same way? So just understanding the language commits you holding these things certain too?

LW: If the proposition 12x12=144 is exempt from doubt, then so too must non-mathematical propositions be. (653)

P: But why? There's a big difference between the proposition that 12x12=144 and the proposition that your name's L.W.

LW: The propositions of mathematics might be said to be fossilized. - The proposition "I am called...." is not. But it too is regarded as incontrovertible by those who, like myself, have overwhelming evidence for it. And this not out of thoughtlessness. For, the evidence's being overwhelming consists precisely in the fact that we do not need to give way before any contrary evidence. And so we have here a buttress similar to the one that makes the propositions of mathematics incontrovertible. (657)

P: What do you mean you don't need to give way to any contrary evidence? Plenty of things could happen that'd make it rational for you to doubt that your name's L.W. Suppose the Austrian Bureau of Birth Certificates calls to notify you of a mistake—

LW: The question "But mightn't you be in the grip of a delusion now and perhaps later find this out?" - might also be raised as an objection to any proposition of the multiplication tables. (658)

P: Yup. That's why we can't be certain about that stuff either. Suppose the world's experts come out in agreement that some proposition of basic arithmetic is false because of some fancy proof the rest of us don't understand. That'd give us good reason to doubt it—even if there is some undetected error in the proof. What's the problem? I never liked the idea that mathematical propositions are true because of the meanings of the words. Take a sentence like "triangles have three sides." The meanings of the words there determines what the sentence says. But that doesn't make what it says true. You need some kind of mathematical fact for that. Yeah, it's hard to say what a mathematical fact is but that's metaphysics and we're doing epistemology here. And I never bought the idea that anyone who understands the language has to accept obvious mathematical truths either. For any mathematical truth, there could be an expert mathematician, logician, or philosopher who rejects it for complicated theoretical reasons but speaks the language just as well as any of us.[2] So even when we're just thinking about mathematical truths, understanding the language—or being a player in the game—does not require acceptance of any particular proposition. Now suppose I'm wrong about all that and certain assumptions—mathematical and contingent—are built into the language and accepting them is required for playing the game. We still need to ask whether we can be sure those assumptions are true. The only way to answer that is to provide some compelling evidence for them. The fundamental assumptions of the language need to be justified, just like everything else.

LW: Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination. (475) Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc., etc.,—they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. (476)

P: Kids don't know jack. But I'll give you that the way most people talk, including the way they learn language and teach it to kids, assumes stuff about what the world is like. But like I said already, that doesn't mean anybody knows those assumptions are true.

LW: "So one must know that the objects whose names one teaches a child by an ostensive definition exist." - Why must one know they do? Isn't it enough that experience doesn't later show the opposite? For why should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge? (477)

P: On your view, I don't see how the game couldn't rest on knowledge, unless you think we can't know anything at all—and that doesn't seem to be what you're getting at. Lemme put it this way. If everything you say—and everything you think—rests on some fundamental assumptions and you don't know

[2] For further discussion on whether linguistic understanding requires acceptance of simple logical truths, see Williamson and Boghossian, *Debating the A priori* (New York: Oxford University Press 2020).

whether those assumptions are true, how do you know that anything built upon them is? Especially when you admit your assumptions include things that could be false. Knowledge can't come from ignora—Oh, look it's that nurse. Hey Nurse M.! Can you come in here and turn this TV up? We can't hear the game. I'd do it but my hands are all bandaged up from the surgery. How'd that go by the way? I remember old sawbones saying he might have to amputate. The way they got these bandages, I can't tell if he did or not.

Nurse M: The two of you, I am quite certain, have had enough television for the day. And the doctor, the one who performed your surgery, will arrive in a short amount of time. This is not an amount of time I can specify with much precision at the present moment but an amount of time I, nonetheless, am quite certain to be rather short, to discuss the outcome of the aforementioned surgical procedure with you.

P: Why can't you just tell me?

M: Rather than have me tell you what the outcome of the surgery was, you must wait for the Doctor. But I assure you that, whatever its outcome, there is not now nor will there be in the future, any need to worry.

P: Easy for you to say, pal. You know you got two hands. Or you think you do anyway.

M: Far from its being true, as you maintain, that we cannot be certain of this or any other thing, I can now provide a perfectly rigorous proof. Here, as I make a certain gesture with my right hand, is one hand. And here, as I make a similar gesture with my left, is another.[3]

P: Fascinating. Anything else?

M: Since I know I have two hands, I know also, and know on that basis, that there are at least two external things. Beyond that, I can provide a list of truisms that I know with certainty. I know that right now there exists a live body, my own body. There was, in addition, a time in the past where this body of mine existed and was much smaller than it is now.

P: I hear ya. Those honey buns from the vending machine are a killer.

M: I know that numerous physical objects other than my own body exist and are not merely presented in space but are also to be met with in space at various distances from each other. I know that this body of mine has never traveled beyond Earth's atmosphere.[4] I know that there is a door in that wall and a window—

LW: What is the proof that I know something? Most certainly not my saying I know it. (487)

P: Nailed it, L-Dub. My gripe exactly. You could be wrong about all that stuff, buddy. How do you know you're not living in some kind of *Matrix*-type simulation on Mars lying prone and naked in a pod being fed hallucinatory experiences and fake memories?

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[3] Moore, "Proof of an External World", repr. in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 126–48.
[4] Cf Moore, "Certainty," repr. in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. x.

M: I am, at present, and as you both can see, standing up. I am not seated in a chair or lying down in a pod. I am not naked but clothed. I am here on Earth speaking and not singing. I know you are there lying in that bed. I know that seated adjacent to you at a distance of approx—

L.W.: I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face.—So I don't know then, that a there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. (10)

M: The assertion not only makes sense but is both true and known to be true. And you are both, I am quite certain, sick. Now, if you would please roll up your tweed, and by that I mean the jacket that currently adorns your arms, shoulders and torso, so I may administer your injection. It sounds as though you are rather overdue.

P: Hold on a second there buddy. I gotta hear this. He was just telling me none of that stuff you're going on about is knowledge. You disagree, obviously. But, since he seems to think we can know lots of other things, I'm trying to figure out how we're supposed to get knowledge from assumptions we don't know are true. If you don't know your foundation is any good how can you trust what's on top of it?

LW: I should like to say: Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry. (151)

P: Regarding it as solid don't make it so. And if our method of enquiry is built on all this stuff we don't know on the back end, I don't see how knowledge can come out the other side unless it's just some kind of conditional knowledge. Like, you can't know *p* but you can know that *if your assumptions are correct*, then *p*. But lemme ask a different question. Nurse M. thinks he knows he has hands because he's looking at them. So why is "I have two hands" or "I am not naked" part of our method of doubt and enquiry instead of something that—at least potentially—results from it? Or take me for instance. Why can't I enquire into whether I have two hands by ripping off my bandages and taking a look?

LW: My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (250)

P: Oh, now I get it. Mine ain't normal circumstances because my hands might've got lopped off in the surgery. So *I* can know I have hands by taking a look. But that doesn't mean either of you two can do that.

L.W.: If I don't know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he knows it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc. (23)

P: So you can know *I* have hands if I'm a trustworthy guy who takes a peek and tells you. Got it. But let's go back to this idea *you* can't know you have hands. I don't buy the argument you gave for that. You said in normal circumstances, nothing can be more certain for you than the proposition that you have hands. But so what? Why does the evidence have to be more certain than the thing it's evidence for? Sounds like you're looking at justification in some sort of rigid bottom-up way. But plenty of people think beliefs

can mutually support each other.[5] If that's right, I don't see why an initially less certain belief couldn't offer support to an initially more certain one and vice versa.

LW: When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) (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. (142)

P: So you think it's not all bottom up. Terrific. But then I'm still wondering why you can't get evidence for the existence of your hands by looking. Since you allow for mutual support, you can't say it's because nothing is more certain for you than the proposition that you have hands because that presupposes some kind of one-directional linear model. But even aside from that, there's plenty of ways a less certain belief can support a more certain one. Lemme give you an example. Suppose a friend calls you on the phone. You ask where he's calling from and you clearly hear him say 'New York' followed by what sounded like 'City'. The last word wasn't perfectly clear because there was a bit of static on the line—not too much but a bit. You believe on pretty good grounds that your friend is in New York City. Based on that belief, you infer he is in the state of New York. Given what you heard on the phone, the conclusion you deduced is more certain than the premise. Evidence can be less certain than what it's evidence for. And that means the fact—if it is a fact—that nothing is more certain for our nurse than his belief that he has hands does not mean nothing could serve as evidence for it.

L.W.: I have a telephone conversation with New York. My friend tells me that his young trees have buds of such and such a kind. I am now convinced that his tree is … Am I also convinced that the Earth exists? (208)

P: It would be weird to *become* convinced of the existence the Earth by having someone tell you the apples are budding. But I can imagine odd situations where that might happen. Still, even in normal circumstances, I don't see why that conversation couldn't provide you with some additional support for your belief that Earth exists. Even if you know Earth exists before you pick up the phone, that doesn't mean you can't get even more evidence for it by talking to your friend. "This confirms what I've known all along." People say that kind of thing all the time.

L.W.: 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? (125)

P: I don't know why you'd bother looking if you already knew. But if you did want to look, I don't see why you couldn't get more evidence that you have hands than you had beforehand. I suppose it could also give you evidence your eyes work. Now, given the right sort of experience, your belief that you have hands and your belief that your eyes are working can mutually support each oth—

M: I am aware that, despite all I have said and despite the perfectly rigorous proofs I have offered, there will be some who think I have failed to provide a proof of the propositions that I have not only claimed to have proven but have in fact proven conclusively here today including especially the proposition that there are at least two external things, a proposition, you will recall, that I have proven from my two stated premises, namely, first, that here is a hand and, second, that here is another. Both of these

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[5] See, for instance Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (New York: Blackwell 1995).

premises are propositions for which I both hold conclusive evidence and, on the basis of that evidence, know to be true.

L.W.: Suppose I replaced Moore's "I know" with "I am of the unshakeable conviction"? (86)

P: Good idea. Why be brief when you can say it with Moore?

M: The dissatisfaction felt in response to my perfectly rigorous proof is, I believe at least in part a product of the view, held by many including apparently Kant, that one cannot prove a proposition unless he can at the same time provide a proof of all the premises relied upon in the proof of that proposition. But I did not, nor did I intend, on this or any other occasion, to provide a proof of the premise that this, to my right, is a hand or that this, to my left, is another hand. In fact, I do not know how or whether one could provide a proof of such propositions. I do, however, know them to be true. I can know things which I cannot prove.[6]

P: Good point—if by 'prove' you mean convince somebody else. L.W. says you can't *convince* somebody that Earth exists by telling him there's a tree outside the window. But the fact that you can't convince somebody else of *h* by appeal to *e* doesn't mean *e* isn't good evidence for *h* and it doesn't mean you don't know *h* on the basis of *e*. Knowing a proposition is one thing, being able to convince somebody else of it is another. Now that you mention it, I wonder how much of L.W.'s epistemology rests on confusing those two things. Any enquiry will have to take certain things for granted. And if you are taking it for granted, you won't persuade somebody who doubts it. But that doesn't mean you don't or can't know it's true. So if the idea is just that all enquiry involves assumptions we can't prove, that doesn't mean all enquiry rests on assumption we don't kn—Oh, there you are Doc! I've been waiting to hear how my surgery went.

Doctor: I am sorry I could not be here sooner. With the big convention in town, we are overwhelmed with new patients. I do not know why they always hold that event so close to Christmas when they know that is our busiest time. To make matters worse, it appears someone set the convention hotel on fire last night.

P: Don't sweat it. We've been passing the time watching the game and discussing whether everything we believe rests on unknown assumptions. L.W. here—if that is in fact his name—thinks he doesn't know books and chairs exist. But then he wants to turn around and tell a kid to fetch his books and sit in a chair.

LW: If a child asked me whether the earth was already there before my birth, I should answer him that the earth did not begin only with my birth, but that it existed long, long before. And I should have the feeling of saying something funny. Rather as if a child had asked if such and such a mountain were higher than a tall house it had seen. In answering the question, I should have to be imparting a picture of the world to the person who asked it. (233) This would happen through a kind of *persuasion*. (262)

P: See what I mean, Doc? Earth's existence is assumed as part of his "picture of the world". And he wants to persuade other people of that picture. But by 'persuade', he doesn't mean he's gonna produce objectively good reasons for it—he can't mean that because he thinks you can't give objectively good reasons for that kind of thing. He's talking about *prodding*, *cajoling* or *converting* people into accepting

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[6] Cf. Moore, "Proof of an External World," p. x

the picture. A picture, mind you, he was not convinced of for any good reason but was himself only cajoled into. And it's not just people were talking about here, Doc. He wants to do this to kids!

D: You need not worry about that. The state does not permit Mr. W to be around children anymore.

P: Well, I don't like it at all. If everything you believe rests on unknown assumptions, then how's any of it knowledge?

D: I see no problem. Consider the kind of example you were discussing earlier where you are talking to a friend on the telephone.

P: Wait a minute. How'd you hear that? You weren't in the room.

D: I was in the hallway and the door was hanging open. That reminds me. The doors in this facility are always supposed to be secured. I will need to have maintenance come in and investigate that one.

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

D: You should not be turning any doors in this facility, Mr. W. You are to stay in your designated room. But I will have the maintenance staff assess the stability of the hinges, thank you.

LW: That is to say, 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. (341)

P: I hear you L-Dub. You can't check the hinges when you're checking the catch. But that doesn't mean you can't ever check the hinges. And it doesn't mean you can't see they need replacing.

LW: The same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (98)

P: So now you think our fundamental assumptions *can* be tested by experience? And not just in special circumstances? Then what's your beef with the nurse?

D: Nurse? What nurse?

P: Nurse M. The guy who was just here. He left as you came in.

D: Oh, him. No, Mr. M. is not a nurse. He is another patient. We put him in that uniform because we ran out of gowns with the large influx of new people in need of treatment. But he should not be wandering the halls.

P: Probably shouldn't be giving out injections either. But you wanted to ask me something about this phone call?

D: Yes. Suppose you have very good reason to think your friend will be visiting New York City. You receive a call and ask him where he is. He says "New York" and something that sounds like "City" but there's some static. It is reasonable for you to believe that he is in New York City. So you do. And from that you conclude your friend is in the state of New York.

P: That's the story. What of it?

D: Now let us suppose your friend was driving in from the north and hit bad weather so he had to pull over a few hours outside of New York City.

P: Then why'd he tell me he was already there?

D: He did not. This is my variation on the example. He said, "I'm in New York and it's shitty." It only sounded like he said "New York City" because of the interference.

P: Didn't know they still had pay phones in Poughkeepsie. What's the point?

D: You concluded that your friend is in the state of New York from a justified belief that he is in New York City. But you do not know he is in New York City because he is not. You do, however, know he is in the state of New York. The example shows that knowledge can rest on false—and therefore *unknown*—assumptions.

P: Not so sure about that one, Doc. Sounds like a classic Gettier case. If that's how it happens, why say I know he's in the state of New York?

D: The kind of luck required for a Gettier case is not present in this case. Given the circumstances and how you formed the belief, you could not have easily been wrong in thinking that your friend is in the state of New York. If he had been in Pennsylvania, for instance, he would not have said what he said and you would not have believed what you did. But there is no need to dwell on this example. Knowledge from false assumptions is commonplace in science. The NASA engineer's knowledge of where the rocket will go is based upon calculations from classical mechanics. But classical mechanics is false. Ergo, knowledge can depend upon assumptions that are not known to be true.

P: No, you got it all wrong Doc. For this to work, it needs to be that the unknown assumption is *essential* to the knowledge it begets. When you say classical mechanics is false, you mean it's not a completely correct theory of the entire universe. But any NASA scientist who relies on classical mechanics to figure out where to point the rocket knows that as well as anybody—better even. In the sense in which it's correct to say classical mechanics isn't true, they don't believe it is. And if the belief ain't there, it ain't essential. Now, on the other hand, you might think NASA scientists believe classical mechanics in that they believe it works well enough for the kinds of problems they deal in. But that belief is true. So any way you cut it, the scientists' knowledge of where the rocket will end up is not based on any false assumptions.

D: But there were astronomers in the past who unequivocally believed classical mechanics to be the completely correct account of the entire universe and they employed that belief in forming other astronomical beliefs. Those astronomers knew things about the paths of the stars and planets.

P: But even in that case, the false belief was not essential. Back then they also believed—correctly—that classical mechanics has an excellent track record and was empirically adequate—whether or not it's universally true. They could've arrived at the same predictions from that belief. So why is the extravagant and false belief that classical mechanics is the One True Theory of the Universe essential?

D: I no longer understand what you mean by 'essential.' You seem here to be speaking in terms of propositional justification when the issue is one of doxastic justification.

P: Look Doc, this is all a red herring anyway. Suppose you're right and these are cases of people getting knowledge out of ignorance. Still, the assumptions in play in these examples are things anyone can independently assess. You can't say the belief that my friend is in New York is a hinge upon which all my other beliefs turn or that it must be accepted by anyone who plays the language game or any of that other stuff. So I don't see any how any of this helps L.W.'s case.

D: Mr. W's case is very severe and will require years of study and careful analysis. Yours, I believe, is less serious.

P: Well anyway, I don't see a reason why anybody should think all our knowledge depends on unknowable stuff. Even L.W. agrees we can treat something as a rule of testing in one context and then test it in another. So, even if they're *unknown* at a given moment, our fundamental assumptions aren't *unknowable*.

L.W.: 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. (96)

P: Now you're talking! I could use a blast of hard fluids right now. We got any of that Goldschläger left?

L.W.: The river-bed of thoughts may shift. 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 the one from the other. (97)

P: Sounds like he's drifting off, Doc. May be time for another injection.

D: I believe he is trying to make it clear to you how, depending on context and circumstance, propositions can change their status. They can go from being things we submit to test to things we must assume to conduct our tests and vice versa. But underlying all that, there is always a deeper assumption that does not admit of rational assessment. And that is the sense in which all our knowledge rests on something we do not and cannot know.[7]

P: Okay, what is this grand assumption and why can't I rationally assess it?

D: First you must appreciate how, in normal circumstances, someone who denied or even expressed doubt that 2 and 2 are 4, or that he had two hands, or that the Earth has existed for more than 150 years would be challenging not only what we believe about those things but our entire system of belief formation.

L.W.: It strikes me as if someone who doubts the existence of the earth at that time is impugning the nature of all historical evidence. And I cannot say of this latter that it is definitely correct. (188)

P: Why not?

L.W.: "Do you know that the earth existed then?" - "Of course I know that. I have it from someone who certainly knows all about it." (187)

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[7] The doctor is here endorsing the interpretation of Wittgenstein defended by Pritchard in *Epistemic Angst* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2019).

D: Indeed, Mr. W. The absurdity of that answer reveals how someone who doubts that the earth existed 150 years ago is in effect challenging all of history and our methods of acquiring historical knowledge and even our concept of time itself. How are we to answer such a person? By appeal to a history book? Or the testimony of an expert historian?

M: You can at once think of a vast list of propositions, a list to which we can add with great ease, whose falsehood is implied by the proposition that "Time is unreal". The truth of any proposition on this list thus entails, and thereby enables me to know, that time is real. I had lunch and then I took a nap. After that, I went to the cinema and then I had tea.[8] Therefore time is real.

P: Hey, look who's back! Now, listen Doc. I agree that somebody raising questions like that might be challenging our fundamental beliefs about the nature of historical evidence and maybe even time itself. And if Nurse M here says he took a nap and then drank a cup of tea, that doesn't really address the challenge. But, still, that doesn't show you can't know that time is real because you know you took a nap before you had tea. People who can't refute Zeno still know stuff moves because they see stuff moving all around them. Why shouldn't something similar be true for knowing that time is real? Seems like you guys are still confusing knowledge and persuasion. But I'm not gonna convince you of that. So let's get back to the bit about the river-bed. There was supposed to be some deep underlying unknowable commitment that never goes away. But you never said what it was.

D: It is the proposition that we are not massively mistaken or deceived. Particular propositions like here is a hand, 2 and 2 are 4, earth is not less than 150 years old, and so on are just our particular ways of codifying or capturing that basic idea. In normal circumstances, there is no way to doubt those propositions without at the same time doubting our fundamental sources of evidence and methods of enquiry. But enquiry must proceed on the assumption that our most basic sources of evidence and methods of enquiry are generally reliable. And that is just another way to say we are not massively mistaken or deceived. Since this assumption is fundamental to the very activity of enquiry, it cannot itself be enquired into.

P: I don't buy it. For starters, why doesn't the fact that we get along so well with our picture of the world serve as evidence for whatever the fundamental assumptions of that picture are—including the assumption that we are not massively deceived? And beyond that, there are abductive arguments against massive deception[9], there are semantic arguments against various skeptical hypotheses[10] and in favor of the proposition that most of our beliefs are true[11], and on and on. Maybe you think none of those work. Maybe you're right. But if you've taken the time to think about and criticize them, you've been investigating what you claim to be uninvestigable. Now of course, since we're down on such a fundamental level, there will be circularity issues. But that doesn't mean there's no workaround. Maybe

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[8] Cf. Moore, "The Conception of Reality" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 18 (1):101-120, 1918.

[9] McCain "In Defense of Explanationist Responses to Skepticism," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 9 (2): 38–50, (2019).

[10] Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1981).

[11] Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell 1986).

some kinds of circularity are okay.[12] And if, at the end of the day, no one can give us any good evidence that we aren't massively mistaken, I don't see why radical skepticism isn't a live option. Maybe nobody knows anything. Maybe I don't even know I have a body.

L.W.: If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. (25) 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. (155)

D: Mr. W, we spoke about this at our last session. You are not to refer to our patients in those terms. It is rude and offensive.

P: Not to mention the whole pot-kettle problem. But lemme put my point another way, Doc. These special hinge propositions are supposed to be unknowable in normal circumstances but knowable in extraordinary ones. Now I would've thought that if we know anything at all, we know that 2 and 2 make 4, that we have bodies and so on. We don't need extraordinary circumstances to know that stuff. It's totally normal.

L.W.: It is queer: if I say, without any special occasion, "I know" - for example, "I know that I am now sitting in a chair", this statement seems to me unjustified and presumptuous. But if I make the same statement where there is some need for it, then, although I am not a jot more certain of its truth, it seems to me to be perfectly justified and everyday. (553)

D: Yes, Mr. W. Unless there is some special circumstance requiring it, it is not normal human behavior to wander around announcing that you know you have two hands, that you know you have not been to the moon, that you know you have a body. Mr. M's behavior is highly abnormal and troubling. But with continued treatment, we believe his condition can improve.

P: Sounds like you guys are making some sort of speech act fallacy here.[13] The fact that it would be weird to *say* you know something in normal circumstances doesn't mean you don't normally know it. The weirdness of the utterance might just be due to its being so obviously true that it "goes without saying"—as the saying goes. And speaking of fallacies, I don't like the way you two keep referring back to extraordinary circumstances to save your theory. If I describe an ordinary circumstance where people can know things you say are unknowable, you're gonna say the fact that it's knowable makes the circumstance extraordinary. But how's that not just a textbook no true Scotsman?

Mr. R.: In order to define "the author of *Waverley* was Scotch," we have still to take account of the third of our three propositions, namely, "Whoever wrote *Waverley* was Scotch." This will be satisfied by merely adding that the *c* in question is to be Scotch. [14]

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[12] Among contemporary critics of skepticism, it is commonplace to proceed on the assumption that certain kinds of question-begging arguments against skepticism are permissible. For examples and a critique of this trend, see Veber "Why not Persuade the Skeptic? A Critique of Unambitious Epistemology," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 9 (4):314-338 (2019).

[13] See Searle *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969), p"p. 141-146.

[14] This is quoted directly from Russell's *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Chapter XVI (New York: Macmillan 1919)

P: Hey look everybody. It's ol' Rusty! How ya been buddy? Haven't seen you since they shipped you over to the neuro-ward. Your surgery go okay? I'm still waiting to hear back on mine.

R: I should say that what the physiologist sees when he looks at a brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining.[15]

P: Couldn't agree more my friend. If you really need your head examined, you gotta do it yourself.

D: Oh dear. It appears even more of the patients have escaped their rooms. Mr. R, I need you to remain seated in one of these chairs while I attend to your friend.

R: A table or chair will be a series of classes of particulars, and therefore a logical fiction.[16]

D: Where is security?

R: When you go and buy a chair, you buy not only the appearance which it presents to you at that moment, but also those other appearances that it is going to present when it gets home. If it were a phantom chair, it would not present any appearances when it got home and would not be the sort of thing you would want to buy.[17]

D: I will need to hurry your bandage removal along so I may assess this situation in the hospital. Now where did I put those scissors?

P: Hey, what was this surgery for anyway? I don't think you guys ever told me.

D: The operation is a treatment for acute doxastic pseudo-anemia—a condition where the patient constantly professes insincere doubts about ordinary everyday things.

L.W.: A doubt without end is not even a doubt. (625)

D: Indeed. Rather than move you to the neurological ward, we performed a surgery that you were informed could require amputation of your hands. The purpose of the surgery was to create a situation where it is possible to know you have hands by looking at them, if in fact you do. If your hands were removed, you would be able to know you do not have hands. Either way, the surgery is guaranteed to supply the patient with perceptually grounded knowledge and thus automatically cure all other skeptical delusions.

L.W.: If you do know that here is one hand, we'll grant you all the rest. (1)

D: I will begin cutting the bandages now. You must pay very close attention to what is revealed when they are removed.

P: Before you cut me loose Doc, lemme ask you something else. I don't know whether I have hands or not. But your position is different, right? You know whether I have hands, don't you?

D: Yes. After all, I am the one who performed the operation.

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[15] This is quoted directly from Russell's "The Analysis of Matter" (London: Keegan Paul 1954[1927]), p.383.
[16] This is quoted directly from Russell's *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (New York: Open Court 1998 [1940]) Lecture VIII, x
[17] *Ibid*.

P: And I imagine you do this kind of work all the time.

D: Your condition is somewhat rare.[18] But it is a perfectly ordinary and safe procedure.

P: What if you peel off the bandages and see something different from what you expected?

D: Different?

P: Yeah. Suppose you expect to see two hands underneath the bandages but then you take them off and all you see is stumps. Or suppose you expect to see stumps and you see hands. What would you think then?

D: I would not know what to think.

P: You mean you would not change your mind and say "Ah, the surgery must've gone differently from how I remember it"?

D: No, I would not draw that conclusion.

P: Why not?

D: Because I cannot see how I could be wrong about that without being wrong about nearly everything else I think and believe. Your operation is routine and very recent. If I remove the bandages and see the opposite of what I expect, my memory or my eyes or my mind itself must have malfunctioned. And if that is the case then we have, as Mr. W said earlier, impugned the very nature of evidence.

P: In other words, there's a proposition about the outcome of my procedure that, for you, has the same status as the proposition that you have a body, that there is a window in this wall, that 2 and 2 make four and so on.

D: I suppose so. Now if you are through, I must remove your bandages so that I may attend to the ongoing situation in the hospital.

P: Just one more thing, Doc. According to you, I can know that I have hands but you can't know that because, for you, that's something that stands fast or acts as a hinge on which everything else turns or whatever.

D: Yes.

P: But if you can't know it, you can't know I know it either.

D: Come again?

P: If I know that you know that *p,* I can deduce and thereby come to know that *p* myself. In other words, I can't know that you know that *p* unless I can know it too. Now here's the problem. Let's say I do have hands under these wraps. In that case, according to you, I'm gonna know I have hands once I take a look. But also, according to you, the proposition that I have hands is *for you* one of these unknowable

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[18] 4.8% of respondents to the most recent *PhilPapers* survey claim to accept or lean toward external world skepticism. https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl

hinges. So you can't know it. And if you can't know it, you can't know I know it. Same thing happens if I don't have hands under here.

D: It sounds as though this simple procedure may not have been sufficient to treat your condition. This was something I was concerned about.

P: You're not listening Doc. Even if you've got the epistemology right—and, for the record, I don't think you do—but, still, even if you do, there's no way for you to tell whether this operation worked or not because there's no way for you to know that I know something you can't know. Come to think of it, it sounds like there's no way for you to know whether your epistemology is right in the first place. In order to know that, you'd need to know that certain propositions which are not knowable by you are in fact known by others. But that doesn't make any sense. If you know that they know it, you know it.

D: I shall be begin cutting the bandages now.

P. Hold on. Lemme ask one more thing. If p is a hinge proposition, is the proposition *that p is a hinge proposition* also a hinge proposition? Because if it's not, then we could get evidence against it. And if we can get evidence that p isn't hinge, couldn't we then get evidence for or against p? And in that case, p isn't hinge. So if the proposition *that p* is hinge, then the proposition *that p is hinge* had better be hinge too. But now if *p is hinge* is hinge, then it's not the kind of thing you can give anybody else any good reason to believe. And you have to admit *you* don't have any good reason to believe it either. But what kind of philosophy is that?

L.W.: I do philosophy now like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys. (532)

D: Mr. W., we will have none of that kind of—

M: I know that at some distance beyond the window before me is a large tree. I know that the distance from my body at which the tree resides is greater than the distance at which the window is situated from that same body.

D: Thank you, Mr. M. Now please move away from the window.

P: Sounds like our nurse has become a bit unhinged, Doc.

D: I must not delay in completing your procedure so that I may—Mr. W.! Why are you out of your chair? And where did you get that ladder?

P: I think the better question is why he thinks it'll fit in the wastebasket.

D: I am sorry but your bandage removal will need to be rescheduled. It appears we have a severe emergency here. I must reach security immediately.

P: Cool. I'll just finish watching the game. We can figure out whether I have hands later.

L.W.: I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy." (467)

P: Yeah right. That's what everybody in here says.