



Wittgenstein and the Duty to Believe

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that hinge-commitments are deprived of an epistemically normative structure, and yet, that although groundless, the acceptance of Wittgensteinian certainties is still rational. The problem comes from the intellectualist view of hinge-approvals which many recent proposals advance—one that falls short of the necessities and impossibilities pertaining to what would be the right description of how it is like to approve of hinges. I will raise the Newman-inspired worry as how to cash the abstract acceptance of principles of enquiry into real assent, as well as the question about how to extend normativity all the way back to foundations. It is my aim here to argue that ethical normativity is the only kind of normativity capable to ground the rationality of hinges. In defence of this, I will draw some consequences from Ernest Sosa's claim that hinges about the external world are logically related to the *co-gito*.

Keywords Newman · Sosa · Wittgenstein · Hinge epistemology · normativity · Rule-following

1 Introduction

This article aims at contributing both to the exegetical question of the influence of Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar on Assent* on Wittgenstein's last remarks¹ as well as to the nondeterministic theory of judgment that from Descartes through Newman comes to Wittgenstein and Sosa.

It is common wisdom among hinge epistemologists that our hinge-commitments involve proactive attitudes such as *approval* and *assent* to propositions that are not (and cannot be) *grounded in evidence* (Wright 2004, p. 41; Coliva 2015, p. 128; Pritchard 2016, p. 64). From this it follows that it makes no sense to claim that epistemic agents *ought* to believe hinge-propositions; at least in the *epistemic sense* of the word 'ought', according to which the nonnegligent agent is rationally mandated to cleave to evidence in forming beliefs. Regarding hinges, one cannot subject her motivational system to norms that arise from epistemic rationality, such as to regulate one's hinge-commitments in accordance with the strength of the available evidence. Neither can the agent comply (or, fail to comply) with epistemic *duties* and

obligations which make no sense within the present context. Hinge-commitments are thus inherently deprived of an *epistemically normative structure*, which may suggest as if normativity did not extend all the way back to what Wittgenstein saw as "the fundamental principles of human enquiry" (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, § 670).

However, the previous suggestion may easily lead to skeptical concerns (as well as to naturalist approaches which succumb to the skeptical challenge). Are we within our rights in taking hinges for granted, when they are not regulated by epistemic rationality? Is our commitment to hinges *arbitrary*? Is such a commitment, as naturalists emphasize, a *visceral* acceptance; one that being rooted in how we are *de facto* constituted, it is just a *compulsive attraction predetermined beforehand*—one that we cannot help but taking, and which institutes either a psychological or a physical necessity, thus fixing certain limits as naturally inviolable? On the naturalist's view, being our animal, first-order 'approval' of hinges an epistemically nonnormative fact, it should be explained by appealing to external and necessary causal processes.²

¹ The influence of Newman in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* has been noted by several commentators, such as Kenny (1990, 1992), Barrett (1997), and Kienzler (2006). However, it has been Pritchard (2017) who has provided a detailed discussion on this issue within the context of Hinge Epistemology. Pritchard, however, does not deal with the questions I am here rising.

² According to naturalists, there is no other acceptance of hinges than the abovementioned automatic attraction, one which corresponds with the animal in us. Naturalism is blind to other varieties

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There is something right in the attention naturalists pay to the *phenomenology* of hinge-commitments, as vivid, solid assents, and as experiential ways of *feeling the force* of certain contents. However, the Achilles' heel of naturalist accounts of hinges is that leaving no room at all for the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable beliefs, they come to conclude that even to raise the intuitive question as to whether it is within our rights to believe in hinges would be empty or devoid of meaning.

Such is precisely the view which all varieties of Hinge Epistemology oppose. Whatever their details, the main versions of Hinge Epistemology share a keen interest in the problem of whether an argument to the end of vindicating the *groundless yet rational* nature of general assumptions is to be found, thus assenting to the view that *the normative (though non-epistemic) structure of hinges* is the core aspect not only of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, but also, of any possible version of a genuine theory of justification and knowledge grounded in Wittgenstein's posthumous text. In this sense, it would not be wrong to claim that the main project for hinge epistemologists has been that of *extending belief-normativity* beyond the epistemological domain, to the end of bringing to light how assent to hinges is rule-bound after all.³

The issue is not only that of finding *which kind of normativity pertains to hinges*, if it is not epistemic normativity; but also, of whether the rational *permission* to accept hinges which, at most, our best arguments might provide, would also make sense of the *obligations* and *prohibitions*, necessities and impossibilities (whether conditional or not), that the epistemic account of our approval of hinges (unsuccessfully) attempted to capture.

How is it that propositions which can be neither demonstrated nor grounded in evidence, which may be the object of our *intellectual assent* but cannot be proved, nevertheless, once we are invited to *explicitly attend to them*, receive our forceful, unqualified assent; so that hypotheses incompatible with them are bound to produce when *properly* entertained what John Henry Newman called a "revolt of the mind" (Newman 1870, p. 191), and objections against them are as

it were spontaneously rejected as artificial, paper doubts? There is an obvious gap between our being rationally permitted (without either recklessness or negligence) to assent to hinges and the unshakeable character of general, Wittgensteinian certainties (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, §§ 86, 103). As it seems, far from pointing to propositions that, given certain assumptions, would merely be *nonrational* (or *inconsistent*) to accept, those certainties are the positive side of propositions that we are unable to bring ourselves to believe, or even to consider, *überhaupt* (unconditionally).⁴ How is it so?

Notice, in addition, that for most hinge epistemologists there is no *self-consistent* alternative to the conviction that hinges are true as long as we represent ourselves as being committed to the rationality of our quotidian, epistemic practices. On this view, the rationality of hinge-commitments is rooted in the function that those assumptions play within our epistemic practices as providing default, presumptive justification to our empirical claims, and so, as guiding the reflective agent to aptness.

As Sosa has recently argued (Sosa 2021, pp. 150–155), the trouble comes from the fact that hinges—or, at least, what Pritchard calls *überhinges* (Pritchard 2016, p. 95)—are so general and indeterminate (as well as so fundamental) as not to be rendered determinately applicable as conferring epistemic justification to particular perceptual beliefs. Those are bad news for standard hinge epistemologists, since it undermines their 'master argument'⁵ for the rationality of hinge-commitments via the *epistemic construal* of their

⁴ 'Unable' here neither express a psychological incapacity (see Wittgenstein 1969/2004, § 392) nor a purely individual constraint as in Frankfurt's volitional impossibilities (Frankfurt 1998, pp. 188–190). It is, on the contrary, the manifestation of a *normative necessity* which is not (and cannot be) a *logical (inferential) necessity*.

⁵ The 'master argument' for hinge epistemologists would conclude that we are within our epistemic rights in approving hinges since such an approval is part and parcel of the mechanisms of everyday, cognitive rationality. The point is that it would be an unreasonable attitude to take that of disbelieving hinges while also admitting that one ought to cleave to favourable evidence to hold reasonable, empirical beliefs. Given that for hinge epistemologists experience by its own would fall short of counting as evidence regarding the corresponding belief if hinges were not taken for granted, it is *logically impossible* to accept that our epistemic practices are rationally rule-bound without also granting rationality to those conditions under which alone the evidential criterion of rationality is even possible (or so the argument goes). Hinge normativity would thus be wider than the evidential norm—it would include within its scope those presumptions and rules without which the evidential criterion would seemingly be unapplicable.

Barring minor details, the foregoing 'transcendental' argument is used not only by Wright (2004, p. 53), but also by Coliva (2015, pp. 128–129) and by Pritchard (2016, p. 98); although attached to different meta-epistemological descriptions. None of the main versions of Hinge Epistemology (including Wright's) propose arguments to the end of increasing the likelihood of the truth of hinge-commitments (Wright 2004, p. 53), which in my view means that all three of them, in one way or another, lay claim to grounding a species of reasonable-

Footnote 2 (continued)

of approval, such as reflective, rational endorsement, or as approval bound up either with ethical obligations or with care for oneself as becoming an entire, unified person (as in so-called ground projects).

³ Despite differences in detail as well as controversial attitudes somewhat artificially taken, this is common ground for hinge epistemologists from Wright to Coliva and Pritchard.

On the other hand, Sosa (2021, pp. 164–166) has recently developed his version of a Virtue Epistemology so as to underline that we can make no sense either of our epistemic practices or of ourselves as epistemic performers without granting some initial presuppositions. It is in this sense that Sosa's complete version of a Virtue Epistemology might as well be considered as a version of Hinge Epistemology.

function as “rules of evidential significance” (Coliva 2015, p. 124).

But Sosa’s approach to hinges also raises a further, important question. If hinges are neither rules governing, nor movements within, our cognitive games, *can our commitment to them become somewhat action-guiding?* And if so, *are we somewhat bound to make of our acceptance of hinges a ruling principle of behavior?*

The problem is as to whether our assent to hinges might be practically operative as (non-epistemically) orientating the agent’s conduct—as to whether it would make sense to depict this commitment as passionate, and so, to see hinges as objects of loyalty and devotion, or as involving a radical change in one’s way of living and assessing life, so as to come with a profound transformation of the center of the self as well as a personal allegiance. It is to the credit of Duncan Pritchard (2017, p. 103) to make a point of the striking similitudes between hinge-commitments and religious beliefs which are defined by the abovementioned attitudinal traits, and so, to be emphatic on his claim that the idea of hinges is not just, if at all, a conceptual device to be used for facilitating certain epistemic operations (Pritchard 2016, pp. 80–81). As it is to the credit of Ernest Sosa to have disclosed the only Archimedean point that can give leverage to such a question, as a query into how we relate to ourselves as agents.

The foregoing question might also be rephrased by appealing to Newman’s distinction between *notional assent* and *real assent* (Newman 1870, pp. 72–85)⁶ as the problem of whether the way of relating ourselves to hinges can cease to be a mere *intellectual apprehension* somewhat in danger of freezing into a verbal formula, and become instead *cached* into a living experience that intensifies assent and brings hinges home to the agent with a sense of first-hand understanding (insight) and self-appropriation. Regarding such general, abstract presuppositions as hinges are, *can we attain to any more vivid (real) assent than that which is given merely to rational principles?* This problem is eagerly pursued by Wittgenstein in his last remarks, as it is borne out by his way of approaching to hinge-commitments as cases of *trust-in* (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, §§ 337, 509, among

others) and *belief-in* (not as manifesting the propositional attitude of *believing-that*) as well as by his regular use of the method of fixing one’s attention repeatedly on *what it would be like* if some hinge or other were false. The latter method is no other than a living exploration into the limits of the *abominable* (the *unhinged mind*) so as to invite us to confront our apathetic faith in hinges.⁷

It is my view that the first condition that any plausible account of the kind of normativity which pertains to hinge commitments has to meet is that of fitting the *phenomenology* of the *mental attitude* of hinge acceptance. There would mainly be two approaches to the question of what the difference is between empirical beliefs and assent to hinges—a *reductionist approach* according to which it is just a difference in the *content* of the proposition approved, so that it would be sufficient for explaining belief in hinges to add some *concepts of value* that are lacking in empirical beliefs to the propositional content which is factually believed;⁸ or instead, a *non-reductionist approach* which underlines that it is a difference in the *attitude* taken to them.

In Sect. 2, I will focus on how the *insolubility of the problem of hinges* marks the limits for any *theoretical* approach to their rational status. I want to suggest that those who follow the steps of standard views as recommending a watered-down version of Hinge Epistemology, in which the very idea of a personal, real, affective relation to our basic certainties is left out, are making at the very least a phenomenological mistake. They take for granted that ‘believing in hinges’ just means ‘giving intellectual assent to hinges.’ But our commitment to hinges can (and ought to) be something more than that, however fundamental hinges may be. It can come to be a commitment that by being cultivated, is capable to institute a way of life which affects our thoughts, feelings, and expectations at many different points. Drawing attention to this personal and affective dimension, I will make room to the notions of ‘care’ and ‘practical rationality’, as well as to the questions as to whether the *will* can play a doxastic function, and as to whether there are limits for the dogma of

Footnote 5 (continued)

ness which emphatically is *non-epistemic*, even though it is grounded in the *consistency rule*, and so, in *logical normativity*.

⁶ As it is well known, real assent does not oppose notional assent as if the latter were somewhat unreal or insincere. For Newman, both of them are full-fledged, unconditional assents. The difference lies in the fact that while real assent comes from a *thing-ish* (*res*, *real*) apprehension so forceful as to be almost as believing as if one saw (Newman 1870, p. 99), notional assent is sustained by an intellectual act underwriting the will. The questions are, “*can one live through hinges?*”, “*should one live through them?*”

⁷ The dramatic character of the quest undertaken by Wittgenstein (1969/2004) is well attested by (among many others) paragraphs 420, 494, 512, 577, 613, 614, 657; where the images of the abyss, the vortex of chaos, the conceptual space as coming to have no fixed point of reference (as in profane space), and the madman, come to the textual foreground. It is also worthwhile to note that Wittgenstein explicitly raises the question as to what kind of proposition is “I can’t be mistaken about that” (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, § 574), where it is the meaning of ‘can’t’, and so, it is the nature of such an impossibility (whether it is epistemic, logical, ethical, or volitional), which are here at issue.

⁸ On this view, belief in hinges would be reduced to believing that hinges are true *and* that hinges are *good at...* preventing cognitive paralysis, providing default justification for empirical beliefs, promoting a unified self, etc.

the *unrestricted publicity of facts*. As it is, being emotionally charged is intrinsic to ethical experience.

In Sect. 3, I will raise the further question as to whether it is possible to fulfill a second condition for a plausible view of the normativity of hinges—that of *grounding non-theoretical rationality in the normativity of hinges*, so as to replace an *internal relation* for the *contingency* that permeates proposals in the contemporary literature that go well beyond the merely intellectualist view of hinge-approvals. Most promising among those proposals is Allan Hazlett's appeal (2016, pp. 254–278) to *volitional normativity* and the *reasonableness of intellectual loyalty*. I find, however, that Hazlett's view falls short both as confusing the rationality of hinges (content) with the rationality of our attitude to them, and as to argue for a species of reasonableness that would be opposed to ourselves as rational, free agents. What I find missing here is appreciation of how insight into hinges is only possible as far as it is *ethical insight*.

This is why Sosa's reflections on agency will be instrumental to lead to core of this article—to the view that the rationality and the normativity of hinges would hang together only as long as *ethical normativity* imposes on us the duty to believe.

2 The Insolubility of the Problem of Hinges

In *Epistemic Explanations* (2021), Sosa has come to improve on previous versions of Hinge Epistemology mainly in two ways—*critically*, as arguing that since almost any empirical belief can be made to accord with our commitment to general assumptions, hinges are incapable to determine what is evidence for what, so as not to be vehicles for empirical justification; and *constructively*, as engaging in a *transcendental argument* to the *incoherence* of the skeptical position, namely to the end of making it explicit how the (radical) sceptic cannot consistently become *convinced* of his own skepticism as long as he represents himself as an enquirer and a thinker (Sosa 2021, pp. 123–143).

Sosa's critical approach undermines the standard view according to which presupposing the truth of hinges is rationally mandated *because* such a presupposition is epistemically functional. He does so by means of a well-grounded rejection of the latter claim—a rejection shared with the sceptic. The point is that if hinges were epistemically functional, they would easily come to be reduced to idle objects of abstract thought, and the sceptic would seem to be right in claiming that basic epistemic practices can take care of themselves, and stand as they are independently of whether hinges are true as well as of whether (urbane) sceptics (rationally) refuse to approve of those assumptions at the second order.⁹

On the standard view, the rationality of hinges was grounded into our commonsense acceptance of the rationality of ordinary, epistemic practices, *through* the claim that it is by assuming hinges that our everyday judgments are guided to justification. Broken that link, and independently of whether our practices are rational (or not), the rationality of hinges comes to hang in the air. Notice, however, that the sceptic goes one step further, and argues not only that (relative to standard arguments) we are not within our rights in believing hinges, but also, that everyday practices are irrational according to our own standard of rational belief.¹⁰ It is at this point that Sosa and the sceptic part company.

I will mainly focus on Sosa's positive argument to the conclusion that a *normative necessity* arises as soon as one tries consistently to combine the claim that one is judging with any representation of the process through which one has come to judge. Thus, a whole theory of judgment emerges from Sosa's confrontation with skepticism. It is, however, Sosa's overall aim that of coming to vindicate our commonsense practices by means of rooting them into agency itself, which in turn is argued to be inherently related to general presuppositions as to the externality and objectivity of our beliefs.

Sosa's argument has a plain meaning, as well as an obvious, transparent structure. On the one hand, its target is a particularly intractable variety of radical, normative skepticism—one which starting from the intuitive premises that (i) cognizers are constitutively blind to our overarching epistemic condition;¹¹ (ii) reflection imposes on us the *duty* of ruling out possibilities, including skeptical scenarios, which if actualized (or even if modally close) would (negatively) affect the rational standing of our judgments; and (iii) though the foregoing duty is a mandate of reason, it is one

⁹ Pritchard is particularly sensitive to this worry, as it is clear from his misgivings on whether a quasi-fideist account of hinges as the one that he proposes would not loose practices of rational evaluation from their moorings in basic assumptions, so as to end up advancing a form of radical skepticism in disguise (Pritchard 2016, p. 70). What Pritchard calls “the insularity of rational evaluations” (Pritchard 2016, p. 3) could easily become too insular for comfort, if one is a hinge epistemologist.

¹⁰ It is important to notice that the sceptic can (and usually does) coherently assume that epistemic practices do not rest upon hinges to operate, and that they would be deprived of rationality if the acceptance of hinges were not rational. The question as to whether it is rational to assent to hinges is thus independent of the question as whether hinges are functional—contrary to hinge epistemologists, who tend to confuse the two issues. As a naturalist, the sceptic provides a deflationary explanation of our practices. As engaging in topics about warrant, aptness, and justification, she argues for skepticism.

¹¹ The point is that being global, skeptical scenarios intrinsically coherent as well as compatible with our experience as a whole, it is impossible to rule them out. This is the premise that *normative* skepticism takes from *descriptive* skepticism.

that is humanly impossible to meet; it comes to the counter-intuitive conclusion that human epistemic performances fall short of the demands of rational reflection, *necessarily* so.

The sceptic comes thus to the verdict that all our claims to know are foolhardy and dogmatic, and all our epistemic performances are rationally negligent and rash by default.¹² More importantly, the sceptic not only seems to be rule-bound in her conclusion, but what she seems also to be doing is to obey rationality *because* she approves of it. In other words, her being a rule follower is part of the sceptic's self-description just as much as it also is her being a free agent who stands by herself in deciding to become responsive to rational demands.

Let me finally note that the sceptic is not making use in her argument of the evidential criterion, according to which the evidence which one has must be on balance favorable to the proposition believed. The point of the sceptic is not that hinges are evidentially groundless, but that assent to them is irrational. Since her point is not epistemic, she cannot be charged with the categorial mistake of applying epistemic normativity to commitments which are not ruled by it. However, those commitments have logical properties such as *consistency*—so that one cannot possibly agree with hinges if one takes responsibility of one's assertions, or so the sceptic argues. The sceptic is thus at least right in making the point that a necessary condition for one *to act conforming to reasons* is that of exhibiting a *proper care for one's claims so as not to be reckless*.¹³ Otherwise, one would not be *inclined* by reasons to her decision.

On the other hand, the crucial point for Sosa is that sceptics are wrong in thinking that victims of global scenarios would retain their capacity to make genuine, though massively false judgments; and so, that they are not right in taking for granted, as it is claimed in their second premise, that by assuming that we are not victims of massive deception, the *quality* of epistemic performances would suffer.

Sosa's decisive insight is that far from being *salient conditions* that the agent must consider in order to perform in accord with rational rules, global scenarios are such as to cancel out genuine acts of deliberation, affirmation or even doubt if actualized. They are thus logically incompatible with judging, thinking, and performing *überhaupt* (Sosa 2021, p. 184); and since global scenarios would affect performances as such (whatever their quality), the (alleged)

¹² It is by claiming that cognitive claims “*will always* be wrong...for the reason of dogmatism and irrationality” (Unger 1975, p. 27), that Peter Unger's argument for universal ignorance seems to factually fit quite well with Sosa's abstract reconstruction of what it is nothing less than the sceptic's trumping card.

¹³ As she is right in taking advantage of this all-important point for drawing her conclusion. Negligent performance is just performance which exhibits no (or not enough) care (for reasons).

obligation to rule them out is not a condition for performing well.¹⁴ One might thus rightly say that for Sosa assent to hinges codifies our core commitment to action conforming to reasons, and so, to rationality itself. Sosa is thus mapping what one is logically obliged to believe if one determines himself to judge for reasons (which is a pleonasm).

Sosa's argument may well be transparent in a certain sense; but some of its far-fetching results can easily remain unperceived. Let me focus on several of its aspects, those which I find particularly relevant for the present context.

First aspect. For one thing, I read Sosa's response to the sceptic as grounded in an implicit theory on what it is the *nature of judgment*, namely on what it means to act conforming to reasons. This theory is instrumental to settle the *transcendental limits* of self-consistent deception.

On this view, the process of deliberation which may result in the act of judging is governed by normative concepts, so that it is constitutive of judgments that they are *determined* by reasons. But what is it for an assent to be determined by reasons? It is to let oneself to be *inclined* (or, to be *moved*) to assent by rational considerations, namely in such a way that although those reasons may justify as well as explain why one came to be convinced of *p*, they can't (as a matter of conceptual impossibility) fulfill the latter function by *preventing* one from judging otherwise. The crucial point is that the agent who acts following reasons *must* always be free to refuse to make the rule of rational belief its own, so as to retain the power to voluntarily control (at least up to a certain point) her beliefs (maybe by directing or averting her attention to evidence at will). For being rational, judgments must be free. They cannot be causally determined behind our backs without ceasing to be genuine acts of judgment (rational, free acts). Therefore, the point from which judgment must start, and the determination to which it arrives, are beyond the reach of theoretical reason—meaning that freedom and agency as the conditions of judgment are as intellectually unsupportable as intellectually unassailable. Freedom is not thus demonstrated, but it is assumed by all

¹⁴ Take, for instance, the dreaming argument. If it were true that I am dreaming, I would be dreaming of myself as thinking and judging, and so, I would be representing myself as entertaining sceptical arguments, assenting to this premise, rejecting that other premise, etc. It is not only that on this view I would relate to myself and to my (mental) actions wrongly—as if they were the actions of other; but also, that because my thinking would be a content *within* my dream, if I were dreaming of thinking I would not really be actively thinking. Thoughts would happen to me as mental imagery unrelated to my cognitive performance. This is why Sosa is rightly emphatic on extending the *cogito* so that the internal relation between mind and world is made salient—I think, therefore hinges are true, and I am not massively deceived by dreams, evil demons, etc. Notice that an analogous point is made by Wittgenstein in discussing the dream argument (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, §§ 383, 671, 676).

questioning, wavering, and (finally) coming to be convinced, as their necessary condition.¹⁵

Global scenarios are, however, worldviews in which judgments are automatically settled beforehand, and judging itself is an illusion—in consequence, they are worldviews of which the sceptic cannot approve (as possibly true) without ceasing to approve of herself as a thinker and a rule-follower. This is why the sceptic's self-description as an enquirer and as voicing the claims of reason cannot be consistently held. Sosa's view of judgment leads thus to the valuable insight that far from being possibly blind, *rule-following necessarily involves the autonomous approval of the rule for oneself*.

The *second aspect* of the argument to which I want to call attention is that thanks to having logically related hinges about the external world to the *cogito*, Sosa has provided us with a way (maybe the only possible way) to answer our Newman-inspired worry as how to cash the intellectual, cognitive acceptance of abstract principles such as (über)hinges are, into a kind of assent *directed to concrete realities to which we are immediately and emotionally (as objects of care and concern) related*—and it is by means of the *cogito* viewed not as much as an special sort of (representational) object, but instead as *free, rational activity*; as well as by means of how we relate to ourselves as free agents.

The point is that being freedom our vehicle for cognizing empirical facts as well as for realizing cognitive acts such as judgments, cognition is not, in turn, the vehicle for relating to ourselves as free reasoners and agents. This opens us up to the acknowledgment of the possibility of a reflective but nonintellectual commitment to hinges which inherits from the care for ourselves as free agents its being emotionally charged,¹⁶ and from our living reality its being meaningfully perceived. Notice, however, that this sort of relation to transcendental facts is such as not to be available to mere

cognizers. It is in this sense that transcendental facts are only accessible after one comes to acquire a certain standpoint (or, maturity), so that it is by accomplishing an inner revolution and a radical turnabout of the will (by overcoming inhibiting factors) that those facts come to be visible in all their meaning for the subject.¹⁷

Also, let us note that the problem that comes with this answer is that of whether, excluded cognition, the free, rational appropriation of free action is even conceivable. It is the worry as if there is a form of normativity which combines rationality, care and faith.

Third aspect. Why faith? Because being Sosa's argument grounded in the *consistency rule* which defines logical normativity, it has not as its end that of providing warrant for hinges. For all we can know, agency can be an illusion, and hinges could be false (Sosa 2021, p. 136).

It is true that there is no self-consistent alternative to our commitment to hinges *as long as we represent ourselves as agents*. However, logical normativity operates from a *given point* which is taken for granted. From which it follows (i) that our *obligation* to assent to hinges is *conditionally* determined; and therefore, (ii) that we only are *rationally permitted* to the factual claim that hinges are true. It is, therefore, as if our belief in hinges (or even in agency) were a matter of faith. The faith in question is not the least bit arbitrary, since their contents are unavoidable as long as we think coherently about ourselves as thinkers (something that the sceptic is unable to do). But not for being a 'rational faith', faith ceases to be faith.

The main problem comes, however, from the gap between the conclusion of the transcendental argument—that one is not rationally obliged to disbelieve (or even to suspend on) hinges—and the *necessities* and *impossibilities* pertaining to what would be the right description of how it is like to approve of hinges—either as the experience that one cannot afford to let hinges fail, or correlatively as the normative insight that one *ought to cleave to hinges*. It can be framed as a *paradox* between the kind of intellectual consent which we are rationally permitted to give to hinges, and the imperative, unconditional acceptance which hinges demand on us—a full acceptance that on the current view would be *irrational* to hold.

¹⁵ As far as I understand it, Sosa's position on the voluntariness of belief (as in Sosa 2011, pp. 31–32) would combine a *compatibilist* aspect according to which one is passively free in following the order of reasons, with a full-fledged *libertarian* view regarding our actional power to refuse to enter into rational belief-formation (such a position has Cartesian precedents). Though I am quite satisfied with the previous account, I would also make the point that, except perhaps in the case of rational intuition, reasons (even the best reasons) do not reach all the way down to conclusions by themselves. Newman grounded what he called “the illative sense” (1870, pp. 336–338) in such a gap between inference and assent. Maybe Sosa's recent stand against evidentialism (2021, pp. 49–75) relocates his view closer to Newman's. Anyway, the theory comes to be succinctly expressed by the thesis that *all (judgmental) determination presupposes an act of self-determination*. My aim here might be expressed as that of capturing the concept of self-determination.

¹⁶ Notice that the sense of oneself as a free agent cannot be reduced to the abstract apprehension of an object. We do not relate to ourselves as detached observers; on the contrary, we do so in such a way that *ethical emotions* like wholehearted endorsement as well as culpable neglect are intrinsic to our self-attitudes.

¹⁷ Cultivation of ethical habits as well as regular exercise of meditative and even devotional practices are not limited to religious conversion. From Descartes through Fichte to Wittgenstein, they have been thought instrumental to pave the road into philosophy, so as to be necessary for discerning important facts, for improving understanding, for activating latent capacities, and also for acquiring certitude. For a convincing view of the therapeutic, transformative nature of Descartes' methodology in the *Meditations*, see Cuning (2010, pp. 14–43).

It may well be that holding hinges is rational. However, it seems to be rational at the high price of claiming at the same time that our assurance of hinges goes well beyond the degree of commitment to which we are rationally allowed. I call this a paradox, since it is an unacceptable conclusion stemming from two indubitable facts—the fact that hinges cannot be proved, and the fact that we cannot come to see them as possibly false.

Is there a way out of this paradox? Which means—Is our attitude to hinges only up to be governed by the species of reasonableness inherited from its contents?—Can normativity be extended all the way down to freedom and agency, so that nothing is given, not even the *cogito*?

In defence of my proposal regarding the normativity of hinges, I draw three lessons from Sosa. First, that assent to agency is either rule-bound or it is not assent at all; which excludes high-order varieties of naturalism and givenism. In second place, that it is a matter of conceptual impossibility that if feasible, the free appropriation of free agency could be an act of determining oneself to follow a rule externally given. Finally, that ethical normativity is the only kind of normativity capable to ground the rationality of agency and hinges.

To put it in a nutshell—being free is not a natural fact.

3 From Rational Permission to Rational Obligation

Let us start with volitional normativity viewed as grounding a species of non-theoretical rationality, and so, when applied to hinges, as overriding the abovementioned paradox between the permissions of reason and the necessities (as well as the impossibilities) of assent.

Allan Hazlett's recent contribution to hinge epistemology has been the first attempt to raise as well as to provide an answer to the paradox.¹⁸ Hazlett's main insight (which I find correct) comes from calling attention to the *phenomenology* of the mental attitude of hinge acceptance as as vivid, solid assent, and as an experiential way of *feeling the force* of certain contents: it is the insight into what might be called 'the self-centered nature of hinge commitment'. His second insight (which I also find mainly correct) draws heavily on Harry Frankfurt's view that what makes of the self a

¹⁸ Hazlett draws heavily on the notion of *the unthinkable* as defining necessities which are neither rational nor ethical, but *volitional*—a notion that comes from Harry Frankfurt (1998, pp. 177–190). He also takes inspiration from H. H. Price's version of doxastic voluntarism (Price 1954, pp. 1–26; Price 1969, pp. 455–488), as well as from the latter's claim that being always inconclusive, evidence does not force one to believe that *p*—a claim that, as many other aspects of Price's invaluable approach, comes from Newman.

bounded and centered (integral) self is its being '*ecstatic*', namely, its being both projected to something outside of oneself, and related to it by means of a ground, *personal project*. From those insights, Hazlett comes to propose that *überhinges* institute *volitional necessities* which bear on personal identity, namely, that one is related to them by *care for myself as I am*.¹⁹

The crucial point here is that hinge-commitments might be conceived as an extreme case of intellectual loyalty to the *worldview* (including the general presuppositions on which it is built) which determines one's personal identity so as to prevent self-alienation and fulfill our drive to an entire, unified self. The emotional life of the agent, the very identity of the person, would thus emerge into a practical certainty and a serious, meaningful commitment to principles that otherwise would be dead and abstract. Even if general, those assumptions would thus contribute to make one's life worth living, if only because they sustain all possible life projects, however different.

Besides, together with instituting self-constituting necessities, care is a legitimate source of reasons. It would be reasonable for me to refuse to do something because by doing it, I would betray that for what I care and stand, and thus, I would betray myself. Likewise, it is also reasonable to refuse even to consider a proposition as being unthinkable so long as its contradictory is deeply rooted in what I am (or in what I am struggling to become). Belief in hinges would thus acquire a kind of *practical legitimacy* which includes necessities and impossibilities—on this view, it would be *rationaly permitted* to reject as an imagination any suggestion to the point that hinges might be false.

There are several aspects which may recommend this proposal. For one thing, it combines the claim that approval of hinges is normatively structured with a genuine explanation (one which does not explain normativity away) of the sources and the emotional force of the attitude we take to hinges. For another, it opposes doxastic involuntarism by way of defining what it is for one unthinkable to believe as what one cannot (voluntary) afford to believe without losing oneself (and one's marbles). However, the main advantage

¹⁹ In the following, I will broadly explore how Harry Frankfurt's reflections on volitional necessities, on the unthinkable, and on personal identity, might shed light upon the issues relative to the rational standing of hinges. Even though I do not agree with its results, there is something intellectually exhilarating in taking a standpoint beyond usual, somewhat stagnant, perspectives. Besides, Frankfurt-inspired suggestions (such as those made by Hazlett) pave the road to new, maybe more fruitful views.

Let me, however, notice that though it is frequent to stress that volitional necessities are somewhat akin to the necessity of ethical obligations, my aim here is just the opposite—to emphasize differences so as to display how ethical normativity is capable to do the job for which Frankfurt-normativity is badly prepared.

of the theory is to provide a way out of the paradox of hinge-commitments, or so it appears.

The shortcomings of this approach are clear, however. First of all, the question to be answered is as to whether a rational approval of free agency is even possible; a question which is quite different from the personal question as to the approval of myself as I am. To put it in other words, it is *care for myself as an I* (namely, as a *free agent*) which is here at issue, and not personal projects for a worthwhile life. In this sense, advocates of the volitional approach would really be confusing *original, reflective self-determination* (as it is brought to light in topics such as the self-validation of reason) with empirical self-determination as when in judging the agent lets herself to be determined by an outside rule.

Could personal projects really become *normative principles* so as to acquire an objective purport and reach out of subjectivity? Could volitional norms reach out to universal agreement so as to impose demands on other free agents? Can a ground project really fall outside ethical authority without thus opposing to ourselves as free agents, and therefore, without dividing, instead of unifying, the self? What all these questions suggest is that volitional reasonableness falls short of practical, normative, intersubjective rationality; the latter being unable to be rooted in obligations to believe (and to do) which, even if they are not to be confused with ‘wishful thinking’ coming from ephemeral desires (Hazlett 2016, p. 265) and are rather active, are too subjective for comfort.

In addition to this, is it not at the very least misleading to suggest that rationality sanctions one’s refusal to think that hinges may be false? Is it not such a resolution an example of appalling *dogmatism*? It is true that fully aware of this accusation, Hazlett attempts to minimize it by means of advancing the claim that *coming in degrees*, volitional necessities are compatible with open-mindedness.²⁰ Whatever the merits of Hazlett’s solution, the problem is that far from being difficult to abandon, überhinge-commitments are *unconditional obligations*. Which means, on the one hand, that they do not admit of degrees (much less can they be assessed by mechanical criteria such as psychological grades of compulsion), and on the other, that one can always refuse to believe (or do) what one must believe (or do).

It is my view that this appearance of dogmatism is one more tale-telling sign of the bogus nature of volitional reasonableness, which is so weak as not to be able to dispel, unlike genuine rationality, the suspicion of dogmatism. The point is that the volitional resolution to cleave to one’s personal identity is *contingently* determined, occurring in

a high degree by chance, therefore deprived of *objective significance*.²¹ Hence it is not a fully free resolution—one which neither can be causally determined nor can be taken somewhat at random. Under the shadow of arbitrariness, hinges considered as volitional necessities withered. Can we go beyond that?

Rule-following involves the free approval of the rule for oneself. How would it then be possible, if at all, to come to approve of a rule by means of taking an original standpoint from which there can be *no given rule* to be endorsed, and hence, no given point from which to hang a chain of reasons as in logical normativity? Which rule would comply with such conditions as would ensure that the agent did not reach out of himself to let himself to become determined by the rule, while the rule is not for that depleted of objectivity and authority?²²

The crucial point here is that as a matter of conceptual necessity such a rule cannot be given, to wit, that there can be *no distance* between the *rule* by which I let myself to be determined and *myself* as being determined by the rule. Otherwise, chance, underdetermination, arbitrariness, contingency, mere subjectivism, givenism, and irrationality, would be admitted into self-determination. This is why the only rule compatible with self-determination is *the rule of free agency*, so that it is only *by making of myself as a free agent my own rule* that I can become determined by a law that, unlike desires, appetites, ground projects, and even good reasons, does leave no residue between itself and the agent who approves of it. It is in this sense (and only in this sense) that self-determination is a necessitating process, as one which governed by normative concepts, it comes with a normative necessity. In any case, it is by means of excluding arbitrariness and contingency (by means of excluding ‘the given’) that the ethical law of autonomy which constitutes self-determination gains a *rational standing*. Better said, in non-relative, ethical self-determination lies the very

²⁰ The idea seems to be that though it may be difficult for one to believe that p, one can gradually come to overcome that difficulty, maybe by voluntarily cultivating attitudes and ideas in favour of p. Thus, open-mindedness and intellectual loyalty would not cancel each other.

²¹ It is doubtful that being objectively meaningless, ground projects could really play—as Frankfurt emphatically argues (Frankfurt 2004, p. 99)—the function of making our lives meaningful. To put it into other words, Frankfurt’s conception of ethics as an uncashed concept which does not involve feelings is a good example of ‘blindness to the ethical’.

I opt for replacing as a limit-category ‘the abominable’ for ‘the unthinkable’, where the abominable is not so much ‘the disobedience of the ethical’ as the absence of an inner, critical voice who reflectively approves of the ethical (namely, the abominable emerges as a self-inflicted privation of the self, as one becoming blindly bound to rules). It even might be plausibly argued that longing for a meaningful life is no other than longing for the ultimate significance of actions which being ethically governed, become really *mine*.

²² The analogous question as to a person’s philosophical beginning with philosophical thinking is raised in Jakub Mácha’s article “Hegel and Wittgenstein on Difficulties of Beginning at the Beginning” in the present issue.

paradigm of rationality to which all the species of reasonableness approach, including logical and epistemic varieties of rationality.

When in judgment I let myself to be determined by reasons, I am aiming at *closing the gap* (as far as it is logically possible as well as pragmatically reasonable) between reasons and assent, so as to replace *free, rational determination* for indetermination and arbitrariness. This process thus approaches to the *absolute limit* of self-determination, which is equally incompatible with *indetermination* as with causal determination. Self-determination might thus rightly be considered an absolute term, and a paradigm of rationality.

It is hence not surprising that for Descartes the highest freedom in judgment is that of intuitive reason and demonstrative proof, where assent appears to be wholly determined by inference—as it was persuasively explained in his classic essay by Gewirth (1943, pp. 34–36). Descartes is only wrong in thinking that there are epistemic certainties that instantiate this highest freedom. As Sosa has argued, even the *cogito* falls short of being unconditionally determined (see also Sosa 2007, pp. 1–21). Which explains why all acts of judgment require an *extra pull* to reach out of underdetermination—one which comes from the will and its spontaneity.²³ I would therefore say that *certainty* only belongs to the ethical principle, and that the space of reasons can only be grounded in nonrelative, practical self-determination.

It might not be misleading to claim that in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein aims at getting the reader into a state where *ethical certainty trumps any sort of theoretical doubts*, so that one no longer bothers about the justification and rational support of hinges at all. If the paradoxical terms are allowed, this point might well be expressed by saying that the rationality of ethical certainty is grounded in its being *entirely groundless* (nothing is given in self-determination).

The strict normativity of the ethical law does not entail, however, causal compulsion. It is always in one's power to reject the command of making of one's freedom the law which governs one's beliefs and one's actions, and thus, to refuse to act according to rational autonomy.

It is, however, at this point that an objection might be easily raised. Even if nothing else is given, is it not free agency itself already given? Are we not taken ourselves for granted? Are we not attempting to convince ourselves that our relation to ourselves must be groundless, while at the same time it is *de facto* grounded in agency as being relative to it?

This objection would be right if there were some distance between the *action* of letting oneself to be determined by

the rule, the *agent* who performs that action, and the *rule* according to which the action is performed. However, there is no substantial agent who precedes as a residual, undetermined, nonrational *thing* the act of following the law of action. Action, rule and agent are logically interrelated insofar as being a free agent is just being *reflectively, ethically related to ourselves as free agents*. The I cannot be a given thing. It only can be a normative, self-revolving structure for being an I. This is precisely what it means Faust's ditto that "In the beginning was the deed"—and thus, what Wittgenstein means when famously quoting it in *On Certainty*, § 402. Agency cannot be given to be agency. "That is just what (its) being 'fundamental' is" (Wittgenstein 1969/2004, § 512)—namely, its being groundless.

There are, therefore, three possible ways of accepting hinges. There is the blind, animal assent to hinges which results in mechanical behavior. Hinges can also be rationally accepted as one cannot represent oneself at the same time as a thinker and a rational mechanism. However, there must also be a real assent to hinges which is a free approval of free agency.

It is with real assent that the agent comes to have such a faith in a world which is made extremely real by self-assumed responsibility, as willingly to commit himself to life with all the terrors attached to that recognition. The point is that the questions Wittgenstein raises and the way he has of relating epistemological issues to the question as to *how we (ought to) relate to ourselves in order to become agents*, also have the potential to initiate an "ethical turn" in mainstream epistemology. By "ethical turn" I mean a view which conceives radical scepticism not so much as a cognitive danger, but instead as a threat to a *meaningful, significant* relation with the world (as well as with ourselves). After all, that the world may wax or wane as a whole is something which can't be fully understood merely in terms of its cognitive availability.²⁴

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²³ Besides being the source of epistemic rationality, the ethical rule is also the source of care. The care for reasons in judging betrays the drive to the unified self which self-determination fulfils. Negligence and indifference are, on the contrary, signs of chaos and underdetermination—of states to which the ethical mandate opposes.

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