ON CONTEXTS, HINGES, AND IMPOSSIBLE MISTAKES

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ABSTRACT: In this commentary on Nuno Venturinha's *Description of Situations*, after highlighting what in my view are the most significant and innovative features of his work, I focus on Venturinha's infallibilist approach to knowledge. This topic allows for a wider discussion concerning the pragmatist aspects of the later Wittgenstein's philosophy. I discuss this in three steps: first, by describing the general similarity between Wittgenstein and the pragmatists with respect to the emphasis on contexts; second, by focusing on the kind of fallibilism endorsed by the pragmatists and its compatibility with Charles S. Peirce's concept of the "indubitables," which I take as a precursor of Wittgenstein's concept of hinges; and, finally, by advancing the hypothesis that it is possible to find a form of fallibilism in the later Wittgenstein too, notwithstanding his insistence on the impossibility of mistakes. My conclusion is that while Venturinha's contextualism finds support in the later Wittgenstein's writings, his infallibilism does not.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, fallibilism, infallibilism, pragmatism, Wittgenstein

To analyze an ordinary proposition, such as "There is a lamp on my table," or "I am working at a table," and to treat such analysis as a starting point from which it is possible to get anywhere. This is the methodological opening chosen by Nuno Venturinha for his *Description of Situations*, a short and yet incisive and highly original work in contextualist epistemology.[1] The idea, inspired by Wittgenstein, is that the description of a situation should offer all that is needed for a comprehensive philosophical analysis ranging from language to ontology, from truth to modality and possible worlds, from the nature of thought to transcendentalism, from skepticism to social dependency. This is an ambitious project carried out in an unconventional way: at first glance, "I am writing at a table" (maybe by the fire?) seems all too familiar as the beginning of a

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[1] Nuno Venturinha, *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

philosophical reflection; however, Venturinha starts from the *proposition* rather than the situation itself, examining its different constituents, the way in which the words are interrelated, and the way in which they explicitly and implicitly refer to or imply a whole cluster of contexts, theories, and philosophical perspectives.

Venturinha's work however is not only original because of its methodological and stylistic choices: it is so also in virtue of its contents. While he does not explicitly identify with any of the existent variants in epistemic contextualism, he undertakes a wide-ranging historical-philosophical journey, putting different perspectives into dialogue and finding allies (or at least partial allies) in thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Aquinas, Bolzano, Frege, and (mostly) the later Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*, as well as David Lewis and Fernando Gil. Venturinha's theoretical aim is to propose a form of contextualism compatible with and indeed *grounding* a realist position. He claims that "a contextualist approach is required if we pursue solid epistemic standards"[2] and wants to find a way to conciliate contextualism with "the objectivism that a contextualist perspective *seems* to challenge."[3] As he puts it elsewhere, the attempt is to keep together "a realist epistemological view with the relativity that results from the context-sensitivity inherent in our knowledge attributions."[4] The picture he draws is that of a world composed of states of affairs upon which individual and perspectival representations *supervene*.[5] And if this is somewhat reminiscent of the *Tractatus*, Venturinha's use of the later Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* wants to highlight something very similar. Unlike contemporary contextualists who are primarily interested in the variability of our knowledge attributions, in Venturinha's reading, Wittgenstein shows that we are always led to assume something as evident, whatever context we might happen to inhabit or consider. It is this background of presuppositions that allows the ordinary evidence to *be taken as evidence*, and this is what guarantees, in the end, objectivity and realism.

Whether a realist interpretation of Wittgenstein is feasible and fruitful or not is itself a huge topic for discussion, as is the tenability of a strongly realist version of epistemic contextualism, and I prefer not to deal with either in the short space of this commentary. Rather, I am interested in focusing on a related but more circumscribed issue; namely, that of fallibilism vs. infallibilism. Connected to Venturinha's realist attitude are his commitment to the factivity of knowledge, his

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[2] *Ibid.*, 32.

[3] *Ibid.*, 85, my emphasis.

[4] Nuno Venturinha, "Précis of *Description of Situations*," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1683–1690, here 1683.

[5] *Ibid.*

conviction that a contextualist approach is (and must be) able to preserve that factivity, and his endorsement of a form of infallibilism (see chapter 6 in particular). Following David Lewis, Venturinha excludes from the domain of legitimate knowledge claims all those possibilities that we are "properly ignoring," those possibilities that contrast with our proper presuppositions; in this way, certain hypotheses (typically, skeptical hypotheses) remain outside the scope of what we are considering. But within that scope—and here is where infallibilism enters the scene—our knowledge, if it is knowledge, is infallible.

Venturinha expands on this in his more recent "Non-sceptical Infallibilism,"[6] where he quotes, with approval, Lewis' infallibilist take: "To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just *sounds* contradictory."[7] Yet, there is an intuitive sense in which fallibilism simply reflects a common conception of knowledge, according to which, roughly, S knows p on the basis of r provided that r makes p *sufficiently probable*, with only a minimal and negligible residue of uncertainty; this was what Cohen had in mind when he claimed, a few decades ago, that fallibilism—though in need of refinement—was generally accepted in epistemology.[8] After all, claiming that we know something and at the same time acknowledging that it still might turn out that we are wrong is not only possible, but pretty common. This is especially clear whenever we take a retrospective look at our knowledge claims, recognizing that we *thought* we knew something, and we were justified in our claim then, but we actually were wrong. The contrast between the two views has recently led DeRose[9] to distinguish between an intuitive and a more demanding "GC (Genuine Conflict)" version of fallibilism, whereby Cohen is using the former, and Lewis the latter: in this view, the opposition between seeing fallibilism as reasonable knowledge (Cohen) and seeing it as a kind of madness (Lewis) is merely verbal, as it depends on there being two different concepts of fallibilism at play in the two theories.

Now, Venturinha does not want to deny that human beings are fallible creatures and have false beliefs. This is patently true for him.[10] What he claims, rather, is that "someone who knows that p cannot be mistaken about p—even if

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[6] Nuno Venturinha, "Non-sceptical Infallibilism," *Analysis* 80 (2020): 186–195.

[7] David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549–567, here 549.

[8] Stewart Cohen, "How to be a Fallibilist," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 91–123.

[9] Keith DeRose, "Contextualism and Fallibilism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Contextualism*, ed. J. J. Ichikawa (London: Routledge, 2017), 145–155.

[10] See Venturinha, "Non-sceptical Infallibilism," 188.

one can admit a possibility in which one would be under the illusion of knowing that *p*;" and this is because "any far-fetched possibilities in which not-*p* are contextually excluded."[11] This is a form of infallibilism, he affirms, because there cannot be a lack of knowledge with respect to what it is fundamental to assume in the actual context under consideration.

While I think that the existence of different notions of fallibilism does matter—and that Venturinha's position might also be called fallibilist according to a relaxed notion of fallibilism (whereby excluding certain hypotheses means admitting that we cannot really *know* that such hypotheses cannot occur)—it is important to understand what exactly Venturinha is ruling out here, because, regardless of such labels, therein lies the substance of his claim. If I am reading him correctly, besides excluding skeptical scenarios, he is also ruling out the possibility of a non-general, non-radical, non-skeptical kind of fallibility. His position then amounts to affirming that if one knows, one is infallible in their knowledge, *contextually speaking*.

It can be argued that an infallibilist position is compatible with and supported by Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty*. Indeed, the indubitability of hinges is often stressed by Wittgenstein (as well as commentators), along with the impossibility of making genuine mistakes about hinges, and the claim that to make a mistake about our basic assumptions, presuppositions or beliefs would look like a mental disturbance rather than a mere error. He defines objective certainty itself (the kind of hinge certainty he is investigating) as characterized by the logical impossibility of mistakes.[12] So, for instance:

> Would this be correct: If I merely believed wrongly that there is a table here in front of me, this might still be a mistake; but if I believe wrongly that I have seen this table, or one like it, every day for several months past, and have regularly used it, that isn't a mistake?[13]

> In certain circumstances a man cannot make a mistake. ("Can" is here used logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances.) 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.[14]

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[11] *Ibid.*

[12] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), § 194.

[13] *Ibid.*, § 75.

[14] *Ibid.*, § 155.

I have suggested that the way in which Wittgenstein deals with doubt and certainty shows similarities with a pragmatist perspective.[15] Yet, the pragmatist perspective is traditionally and uncontroversially taken as the exemplary case (maybe the very origin) of a fallibilist approach to knowledge.[16] But if Venturinha is right in finding support for his infallibilist account of a contextualist epistemology in a Wittgensteinian approach to certainty and evidence, then there must be some incoherence or incompatibility between the Wittgensteinian and the pragmatist views of knowledge.

I think there are differences between the two, but these differences are not so much related to their respective attitudes towards the fallibility or infallibility of human knowledge (including contextual human knowledge). I will show this in three steps: first, by describing a general similarity between Wittgenstein and the pragmatists with respect to the emphasis on contexts; second, by focusing on the kind of fallibilism endorsed by the pragmatists and its compatibility with Charles S. Peirce's concept of the "indubitables," which I take as a precursor of Wittgenstein's concept of hinges; and, finally, by advancing the hypothesis that it is possible to find a form of fallibilism in the later Wittgenstein too, notwithstanding his insistence on the impossibility of mistakes on hinges.

The existence of general similarities between Wittgensteinian and pragmatist views on the importance of contexts is generally acknowledged. Following Medina[17] it is possible to identify some features that are common in both Wittgenstein and the pragmatists: the materiality of language (the embeddedness of linguistic practices in forms of life); the performativity of language (the inseparability of words and actions); the social character of the contexts in which words and sentences acquire meaning; and the temporal dimension of such discursive contexts. Medina also highlights the tacit background agreement that, in both views, allows a sharing of perspectives that in the end *is* meaning itself, a background that in his opinion is not to be intended as a foundation. What both views suggest, Medina observes, is that once contexts are properly taken into

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[15] Anna Boncompagni, *Wittgenstein and Pragmatism:* On Certainty *in the Light of Peirce and James* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[16] Hilary Putnam has famously claimed in *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 21: "That one can be both fallibilistic *and* antisceptical is perhaps *the* basic insight of American Pragmatism."

[17] José Medina, "In Defense of Pragmatic Contextualism: Wittgenstein and Dewey on Meaning and Agreement," *The Philosophical Forum* 35(3) (2004): 341–369. Medina discusses Dewey in particular, but his reasoning can safely be extended to pragmatism in general.

account, the underdetermination of meanings does not result in indeterminacy; on the contrary, it results in meanings becoming contextually *determinate*.[18]

Granted this, let me turn to the pragmatists' attitude concerning doubt and certainty. I'd like to call attention here to Charles S. Peirce's writings on critical common-sensism, which represent his way of absorbing and at the same time overcoming Thomas Reid's common-sense philosophy. Besides echoing Reid's rejection of the "closet doubt" of philosophers in his own rejection of the "paper doubt" of a Cartesian skeptic (in much the same style as Wittgenstein does), Peirce is here interested in identifying a class of indubitable assumptions that are generally common to humankind and are in principle exempt from doubt (to use a Wittgensteinian expression).

There are, according to Peirce, three kinds of "indubitables."[19] Indubitables of the first kind are perceptual judgments: we cannot doubt what we perceive. Those of the second kind are acritical inferences, where "acritical" means "unexamined:" our reasoning proceeds according to some instinctive general principles, habits of thought, guiding rules, of which we are normally unaware. Basically, these are the rules of logic or reasoning. Finally, the third type of indubitables are "original beliefs of a general and recurrent kind," where "original" means "uncriticised." These original beliefs are instinctive and common to all human beings; they *can* change through time, but very slowly and almost imperceptibly. Examples are the belief that fire burns, and the belief in the criminality of incest. Now, what perceptual judgments, acritical inferences, and original beliefs have in common, is that we normally take them for granted in our ordinary life, in an instinctive, natural, implicit way, without doubting them, and without the need to somewhat justify or ground them. But the reason why they are indubitable is not that they are self-evident truths: rather, the point is that *in our present situation, we do not see that they are subject to doubt*.[20] Indubitability, therefore, does not entail truth: human knowledge is fallible, and it is fallible even

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[18] See in particular John Dewey's paper "Context and Thought," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, Volume 6 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 3–22, with its insistence on the fact that "neglect of context is the greatest single disaster which philosophic thinking can incur" (11), and more generally his *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, Volume 1 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

[19] Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, vols. I–VI*, ed. by P. Weiss and C. Hartshorne (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 5.442 (volume number, paragraph number).

[20] J.E. Broyles, "Charles S. Peirce and the Concept of Indubitable Belief," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 1, 2 (1965): 77–89.

on indubitables. Without contradiction, from this perspective, it is possible to consider something indubitable, and yet acknowledge that we might be wrong. This is so even for perceptual judgments: perception too indeed for Peirce is indubitable but always fallible. Additionally, in explaining what the difference is between his view and Thomas Reid's, Peirce emphasizes that *critical* common-sensists are critical in that they assign a great value to doubt (the genuine doubt of a real inquiry, of course, not the paper doubt that Peirce criticized). This means that they are aware that nothing prevents an indubitable to be doubted, and even to be declared false, in the future. Indubitables indeed only remain such "in their application to affairs that resemble those of a primitive mode of life."[21] To reiterate, in this view there is no contradiction between indubitability and fallibility:

> [W]hile it is possible that propositions that really are indubitable, for the time being, should nevertheless be false, yet in so far as we do not doubt a proposition we cannot but regard it as perfectly true and perfectly certain.[22]

Given the similarity between Peirce's indubitables and Wittgenstein's hinges, one can ask whether this conclusion holds for Wittgenstein as well. My answer is both yes and no. Let me first explain why I think not.

The views are not the same because in Peirce, but not in Wittgenstein, there is only a difference of degree between indubitability and dubitability, and what is indubitable belongs to the same "realm," so to speak, of what is dubitable: the epistemic realm. Indubitables and ordinary beliefs, in the end, are made of the same stuff. Conversely, in Wittgenstein there is a difference in kind or a categorical distinction between hinges and ordinary beliefs, and the indubitability of hinges is logical, not empirical: it is because of the framework role that a hinge plays in a language game, that it cannot be put in doubt. This is a big difference indeed, and it is traceable back to a more general difference between Wittgenstein and pragmatism, having to do with the nature of knowledge and inquiry and the relationship between science and philosophy. But I do not want to linger on this. The "yes" side of the answer is what matters: I believe that, notwithstanding his insistence on the impossibility of making mistakes concerning hinges, a *form* of fallibilism is present in Wittgenstein too. This might sound contentious, and I am certainly not claiming that Wittgenstein was a fallibilist in the same sense of Peirce (as I hope to have shown above); nevertheless, I think it is worth examining a couple of remarks from OC in order to investigate this further:

> I say "I know p" either to assure people that I, too, know the truth p, or simply as

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[21] Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 5.445.
[22] *Ibid.*, 5.498.

> an emphasis of |-p. One says too, "I don't *believe* it, I *know* it." And one might also put it like this (for example): "That is a tree. And that's not just surmise."
> But what about this: "If I were to tell someone that that was a tree, that wouldn't be just surmise." Isn't this what Moore was trying to say?[23]

> It would not be surmise and I might tell it to someone else with complete certainty, as something there is no doubt about. But does that mean that it is unconditionally the truth? May not the thing that I recognize with complete certainty as the tree that I have seen here my whole life long—may this not be disclosed as something different? May it not confound me?
> And nevertheless it was right, in the circumstances that give this sentence meaning, to say "I know (I do not merely surmise) that that's a tree." To say that in strict truth I only believe it, would be wrong. It would be completely misleading to say: "I believe my name is L.W." And this too is right: I cannot be making a mistake about it. But that does not mean that I am infallible about it.[24]

Wittgenstein is here interested in the difference between saying "I know" and saying "I believe." In this context, he notices that telling someone with complete certainty "I know (and do not merely surmise) that that's a tree" is right, precisely like in the case of one's name: "I know" and do not merely "surmise" or "believe" that my name is so-and-so. Additionally, I cannot make a mistake on this. It is indubitable. Nevertheless, "that does not mean that I am infallible about it." The last sentence is surprising if one interprets indubitableness and the impossibility of mistakes in an infallibilist framework. But I think it should not be interpreted too straightforwardly as a fallibilist claim either, if fallibilism is intended as something that keeps the door open to skepticism. Wittgenstein is not claiming that we will never really know what our name is, or we will never really know whether there is a tree in front of us when we see a tree. He is saying that it is correct to speak of knowledge here—even indubitable knowledge—in the *grammatical* sense of knowing. "I know" here signals the fact that "this stands fast," that there is no such thing as a doubt in this context, that this is an objective certainty. It does not express an epistemic relationship between a subject and a proposition.[25] If I understand him correctly, the point he is making is that this kind of obvious, practical, active, tacit, animal certainty is unshaken, because it is not a form of knowledge in the *empirical* sense of the term. As Stanley Cavell famously

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[23] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 424.

[24] *Ibid.,* § 425. Notice that Wittgenstein wrote these remarks on the same day when he also observed: "So I am saying something that sounds like pragmatism. / Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*." (§ 422, March 21st, 1951)

[25] On the grammatical use of "I know" see Annalisa Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 74 ff.

argued, Wittgenstein is saying that our basic and fundamental relationship with the world is *not* one of (empirical) knowing. This is to say that, *if we want to see this relationship as one of knowing*, then we must admit that we do not really know that this is a tree, that my name is so-and-so, etc. We do not know this, in the empirical sense of "knowing," *because* we know this, in the grammatical sense of "knowing:" we are sure about this, it stands fast for us.

Where is the fallibilism in this position? It lies in the acknowledgment that it *still* might turn out, for some unexpected reasons, that we failed. It might turn out that the tree that I have seen here my whole life long eventually discloses as something different (say, a picture, or a hologram). It might turn out that one morning I open the door of my house and find myself in front of a ravine, because a landslide has occurred during the night. Or it might turn out that according to the General Registrar's Office my name is spelled differently that I have always thought. The physical possibility of a failure of knowledge remains open.[26] Why is this not a form of skepticism? Because this physical possibility does not touch the objective certainty and the instinctive trust with which I live. It is misleading to conclude, from the extremely unlikely possibility that when I open my front door I find myself in front of a ravine, that the certainty with which I open the door every day is just "hastiness or superficiality."[27]

Perhaps Venturinha would reply to my concern by highlighting that the very unlikely possibilities described above were already excluded from the contextual situation we are considering, and that within the context we are considering, our knowledge is infallible. Yet, it is precisely in *this* context, and not in a hypothetical skeptical scenario, that it might turn out that my front door opens on a ravine. The possibilities that need be excluded, as I see the problem, are alternative contexts, such as the skeptical ones, rather than extremely unlikely but nonetheless concrete possibilities within our context. And because we cannot exclude them, we cannot claim that our knowledge is infallible.

To wrap up. Among the merits of this challenging and thought-provoking little book, is the stimulation of reflections on a vast array of topics. I have chosen

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[26] See Luigi Perissinotto, "'… to begin at the beginning': The Grammar of Doubt in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*," in *Doubt, Ethics and Religion: Wittgenstein and the Counter-Enlightenment,* eds. Luigi Perissinotto and Vicente Sanfelix (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2011), 155–182.

[27] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 358. This does not mean that in order to defeat skepticism we just have to appeal to natural dispositions or pragmatic reasons in a Humean / Strawsonian fashion. Contrasting skepticism rather requires showing that it is part of the grammar of our concept of doubt, that doubt can only arise against a backdrop of certainty. This of course is a much wider issue on which I cannot expand here.

one—fallibilism vs. infallibilism—which has allowed me to expand on some similarities I see between the later Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* and the pragmatists. If my reading of *On Certainty* is correct on this point, then Venturinha's contextual infallibilism does not find support in the later Wittgenstein—more specifically: the "contextualist" part of it does, but the "infallibilist" part does not. I am sure his reply will provide new insights and push the debate further, both on *On Certainty* and on contextualism.