

Moral Hinge Principles and Freirean Pedagogy

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I. A Reading of Wittgenstein on Hinges

The intended class of hinge propositions is uncertain, but it was meant to include more than just our basic inductive principles and the assumptions we must make to accumulate observational evidence and reason from it. In addition to these tradition sources of knowledge, Wittgenstein includes among the “hinges” various less general propositions acquired via enculturation: an adult’s knowledge of her own name and the meanings of other words in her native language, a man’s assumption that he hasn’t been to places he can’t remember visiting, and the supposition, common at the time of composition, that no one had yet been to the moon. The list goes on.

340. We know, with the same certainty with which we believe any mathematical proposition, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it “blood.”

341. 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.

Wittgenstein’s heterogeneous choice of examples presents us with our initial interpretive challenge: what are hinge propositions supposed to be?

(1) Common Ground: All of Wittgenstein’s hinge propositions are taken as “common ground” in ordinary contexts in which we are trying to raise questions and answer doubts. We each assume them and assume that those with whom we interact assume them in these contexts.¹

464. My difficulty can also be shown like this: I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly I say: “I knew all along that you were so-and-so.” Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark? I feel as if these words were like “Good morning” said to someone in the middle of a conversation.

466. Thus it seems to me that I have known something the whole time, and yet there is no meaning in saying so, in uttering this truth.

(2) Inaccessible Grounds: Once these claims are asserted or challenged—and so removed from common ground in the contexts on which Wittgenstein focuses—most (if not all) of us find it difficult (if not impossible) to defend them in a non-circular, non-dogmatic manner.

88. It may be for example that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they were ever formulated. They lie apart from the route traveled by enquiry.

94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

204. Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; — but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.

¹ This is an oversimplification. For example, you take your knowledge of your name for granted in thought but not speech. There is nothing extraordinary about introducing yourself to an unfamiliar party. Still, once circulated, knowledge of your name’s meaning becomes common ground. A speaker derails conversation by constantly reintroducing herself.

(3) Pragmatic Entrenchment: Hinge propositions are all “imminently necessary” in that we cannot participate in an identified social practice or “form of life” without assuming them and therein placing them beyond psychologically real doubt.

7. My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. — I tell a friend e.g. “Take that chair over there,” “Shut the door,” etc. etc.

103. And now if I were to say “It is my unshakeable conviction that etc.,” this means in the present case too that I have not consciously arrived at the conviction by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it.

Wittgenstein flirts with the idea that the implicated forms of life are themselves necessitated by our sociobiology, making belief in hinge propositions “humanly necessary” in the relevant sense.

358. Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.)

359. But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.

And there are passages too where Wittgenstein entertains the suggestion that we must assume hinge propositions to reason at all: that doubting them means insanity.

155. In certain circumstance 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.

674. There are, however, certain types of case in which I rightly say I cannot be making a mistake, and Moore has given a few examples of such cases. I can enumerate various typical cases, but not give any common characteristic. (N.M. cannot be mistaken about his having flown from America to England a few days ago. Only if he is mad can he take anything else to be possible.)

But on the reading I favor, Wittgenstein ultimately rejects the idea that *all* of the “hinges” he has identified possess these relatively “transcendental” forms of necessity.

(4) Relativity of (Some) Hinges to (Contingent) Forms of Life

611. Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

612. I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, — but wouldn't I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

II. Moral Common Ground, Moral Hinges, and Deductions of “Ought” from “Is”

THESIS 1: If we analyze core moral principles as hinge propositions in Wittgenstein’s sense we must allow that we do indeed deduce “ought” from “is.”

THESIS 2: Hume failed to see this because of his a prioristic theory of relations.

Examples of Moral Principles that are Functioning as Common Ground: (A) European colonists acted immorally when enslaving Africans for profit. (B) Fairness is a virtue in a proposed tax policy.

For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason. (Hume, T 3.1.1)

Hume's argument against deducing "ought" from "is."

If you assert, that vice and virtue consist in relations susceptible of certainty and demonstration, you must confine yourself to those *four* relations, which alone admit of that degree of evidence; and in that case you run into absurdities, from which you will never be able to extricate yourself. For as you make the very essence of morality lie in the relations, and as there is no one of these relations but what is applicable, not only to an irrational but also to an inanimate object; it follows, that even such objects must be susceptible of merit or demerit. *Resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality*, and *proportions of quantity and number*, all these relations belong as properly to matter, as to our actions, passions and volitions. 'Tis unquestionable, therefore, that morality lies not in any of these relations, nor the sense of it in their discovery. (T. 3.1.1.19)

THESIS 3: Of course, theorists can define "deduction" so that it excludes inferences of "ought" from "is." But these definitions will distort our conception of normative judgment in service of an a priori stipulation.

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. (T. 3.1.1.26)

If we know the passions, motives, volitions and thoughts of someone accused of murder, and we know the effects her actions had on the people she killed, we can know with certainty whether she acted viciously. And this is because the inference from these motives and effects to the relevant moral evaluation often accords with a conditional principle that is itself a "hinge" in the sense Wittgenstein articulated. Those involved in our form of life can only *pretend* to doubt such a principle, as Hume did in the passage above.

III. Hume's Law, Meta-ethics and Moral Doubt

The Admitted Relativity of Moral Hinges to Contingent Forms of Life: the discursive centrality of a principle or proposition does not entail its necessity in a language-independent sense of the concept.

THESIS 4: Many moral hinges are revisable.

Argument: Though some forms of communication are dictated by our biological commonalities, this biology is not itself fixed. In consequence, a non-dogmatic interlocutor cannot dismiss a

skeptic who articulates and challenges a hinge proposition until she has established that it is beyond our capacity for doubt. Certainty is one thing. We should acknowledge it where we find it. But dogmatic speech in defense of certainty is another thing entirely: it is decidedly “unphilosophical” and so anathema to Wittgenstein and his audience.

THESIS 5: Some moral hinges are not revisable. These hinges are preconditions for the processes that enable the revision of a hinge.

To revise a moral hinge we must discern a genuine alternative to the form of life in which it is entrenched. Without a certain amount of peace and goodwill a genuine alternative of this kind cannot be revealed to us. Example: No society could really fail to find viciousness in murder because even if a “society” of murderers is possible it could not reveal its form of life to us.

THESIS 6: Hume urges his readers to articulate and question the inferences of “ought” from “is” employed by parents, teachers, politicians, clergy and all those who engage in normative instruction, speech and command. (This is the “vulgar morality” he recommended we subvert.) But though this form of critical reflection has its place, Hume failed to contemplate or articulate its limits (cf. Habermas 1991, 201-2).

A Gricean Violation: Imagine a professor of applied moral philosophy taking aim at gross economic inequality or racial profiling in policing or abortion or religious intolerance. The professor takes some time laying out the relevant sociological facts p, q and r—i.e. Hume’s “real existences”—and then argues from these facts to the injustice of the laws, policies or institutions she deems objectionable. We can suppose that she aims to spend the course discussing the “evils” she has identified in the hopes that her students will join her in seeking to mitigate them. But now let us also suppose that before the class can be led far along this path, an enterprising student, who has read her Hume, asks why we should assume that something that is p, q and r is indeed unjust. Let’s stipulate that the answer is not to be found in Hume’s sentimentalism. It’s not just that pangs of sympathy are felt by the sufficiently empathetic in the class when they contemplate the lives of those suffering in the ways described by p, q and r. Let us suppose instead that the teacher and student would have to radically alter their lives to refrain from *believing* (in a pragmatic sense) that the obtaining of p, q and r is wrong or unjust. We stipulate, in other words, that this hinge principle was common ground to the class, but that the Humean challenge robbed it of this status within the classroom setting. When the conversation is derailed from ethics to meta-ethics in the way, what is a professor to do?

The Meta-ethical Response: The Humean student is an empiricist hero keeping the class free from the dogmatic deployment of political ideology.

The predominance in the minds of moralists of a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science: and that this would be benefited by an application to it of the same disinterested curiosity to which we chiefly owe the great discoveries of physics. (H. Sidgwick *The Methods of Ethics* (1874))

THESIS 7: Humean Critique is not an expression of “disinterested curiosity.”

Hume *recommends* a form of critical reflection that he *promises* will rid us of our “vulgar” morality. He is not *describing* but *proscribing*. Indeed, he promises a significant effect on our *values*, an effect we can verify by gauging his muted reaction to the Scythians. So Hume’s law is normative in both intent and effect.

Preliminary Conclusion: Moral certainty can be harmful and moral doubts ameliorative. This depends on the context and the criteria invoked to defend these evaluations. My point here is that

neither applied ethics nor meta-ethics is “objective.” We should assume in advance that both types of instruction change our students’ values.

IV. Freirean Pedagogy

Question: How ought our appreciation of the political effects of moral philosophy shape our syllabi and our (ever-evolving) moral pedagogies?

The Sectarian’s avowed rationale for Ivory Tower inaction is a fatalistic metaphysics that Freire derides as myth.

Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality. Conversely, sectarianism, because it is mythicizing and irrational, turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) “reality.” (Freire, 2005, 37; cf. 101-2)

Freire did not expect owners and managers to open their books to laborers in the absence of legal coercion or financial incentive. But he seems to have thought that a less directly actionable knowledge of the economy would nevertheless have some positive effect on his students, and he saw the proliferation of critical political discussion among them as an intrinsic good that would revolutionize society.

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. (2005, 66)

People will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of the praxis, that is, if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naive knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality. If revolutionary leaders deny this right to the people, they impair their own capacity to think—or at least to think correctly. Revolutionary leaders cannot think without the people, nor for the people, but only with the people. (2005, 131)

Still, it is only when Freire turns to an articulation of his students’ *concepts* that his methods begin to converge with contemporary academic moral philosophy.

Consistent with the liberating purpose of dialogical education, the object of the investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found. (2005, 97)

Dialogically established knowledge of these conceptual frameworks is supposed to be just as important for revolutionary practice as knowledge of the workings of business.

The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality. (2005, 106)

Freire grounds this claim in his analysis of the “myths” that force the poor to internalize the conception of their lot most favorable to those who are exploiting them for undue profit.

It is necessary for the oppressors to approach the people in order, via subjugation,

to keep them passive. This approximation, however, does not involve being with the people, or require true communication. It is accomplished by the oppressors depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo: for example, the myth that the oppressive order is a “free society;” the myth that all persons are free to work where they wish, that if they don’t like their boss they can leave him and look for another job; the myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur—worse yet, the myth that the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur as the owner of a large factory; the myth of the universal right of education, when of all the Brazilian children who enter primary schools only a tiny fraction ever reach the university; the myth of the equality of all individuals, when the question: “Do you know who you're talking to?” is still current among us; the myth of the heroism of the oppressor classes as defenders of “Western Christian civilization” against “materialist barbarism;” the myth of the charity and generosity of the elites, when what they really do as a class is to foster selective “good deeds”....the myth that the dominant elites, “recognizing their duties,” promote the advancement of the people, so that the people, in a gesture of gratitude, should accept the words of the elites and be conformed to them; the myth that rebellion is a sin against God; the myth of private property as fundamental to personal human development (so long as oppressors are the only true human beings); the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed, as well as the myth of the natural inferiority of the latter and the superiority of the former. All these myths (and others the reader could list), the internalization of which is essential to the subjugation of the oppressed, are presented to them by well-organized propaganda and slogans, via the mass “communications” media—as if such alienation constituted real communication! (2005, 139-40).

If we adopt a sense of “philosophy” linked to contemporary academic practice, we can say that the distinctively “philosophical” components of Freire’s pedagogy center on the articulation and critical evaluation of malignant propositions that his students assumed in their daily lives. Still, Freire was focused on oppressed people who had internalized the perspectives of their oppressors. While some of our students resemble Freire’s in this way, many do not. If a student does not suffer from a lack of self-respect induced by the common assumption of her inferiority made salient to her by those who think of themselves as her superiors, she cannot gain self-respect by exploding this assumption. Still, I want to suggest that Freire’s methods have other advantages.

ANALYSIS: (1) The myths Freire lists are hinge propositions in Wittgenstein’s sense. They are typically elements of common ground, and once they are robbed of this status they are then difficult (if not impossible) to defend in a non-dogmatic fashion. (2) These myths do seem relatively well enmeshed in various forms of life sustained by their assumption. (3) But these principles differ dramatically from those described by Hume and Wittgenstein in their malleability. They are neither essential for sanity nor necessitated by human sociobiology.

Final Proposal: Distinguish with Hume between those hinge principles that are stable upon reflection and those hinge principles that are not. Focusing one’s audience, as Hume did, on those moral principles that are relatively stable upon reflection insures a temporary retraction of moral concern and the relative epiphenomenality of moral instruction over the long haul. Focusing one’s audience, as Freire did, on principles that are relatively unstable, opens up the possibility of a truly revolutionary pedagogical experience, which might be described as the displacement of one moral language game by another. Once articulated and examined, an unstable hinge principle can be reclassified as myth, and students can begin to doubt it in a pragmatic sense of doubt linked to those real changes in thought and action that mark a genuine alteration in someone’s form of life. Teachers of moral philosophy do not need to directly shift emphasis from the less malleable to the more. Instead, this aim can be accomplished by allowing students greater control over their education in moral philosophy.