BOOK SYMPOSIUM:
Nuno Venturinha, *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Springer, 2018)

CONTEXT-SENSITIVE OBJECTIVISM: GOING DEEPER INTO *DESCRIPTION OF SITUATIONS*

Nuno VENTURINHA

ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the major topics addressed in my book *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Springer, 2018), anticipates some possible misunderstandings and discusses issues that warrant further investigation.

KEYWORDS: context-sensitivity, knowledge, objectivism, realism, scepticism

Philosophers all too easily forget that we live in a physical world. They are prone to stress the importance of man and his rationality, but the fact is that human existence on earth is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of our universe. If contemporary cosmologists are right in dating the beginning of the universe to about 13.8 billion years ago then, on Carl Sagan's famous cosmic calendar scale, humanity would not come prior to 31st December—and already late for New Year's Eve dinner. This should make us wonder whether an anthropocentric form of looking at reality is the right way to capture it. It may be argued that there is no alternative, that we are bound to our mind-dependent perspective and that any purported mind-independent, realist claims are, after all, impregnated with subjectivity. That is the reason why for anti-realists what is at stake are "assertibility-conditions," which, as Timothy Williamson remarks, "are not truth-

conditions even on Dummett's anti-realist conception of truth."[1] The philosopher of science Stathis Psillos offers a useful characterization of the kind of realism repudiated by the Dummettian approach. He says that any realist must subscribe to the view "(a) that assertions have truth-makers and (b) that, ultimately, what these truth-makers are hinges on what the world is like independent of our theorising and not on the criteria of epistemic appraisal we may use."[2] Anti-realists cannot tolerate these requirements—they look too essentialist, too Platonist. The developments in the understanding of language as a social phenomenon, they maintain, imply taking everything as a cultural construction, be it philosophy, religion or science. But Psillos draws an insightful consequence from the anti-realist, "epistemically constrained" view:

> It follows that what is true of the world could not possibly be different from the description of the world that gets licensed by the relevant set of criteria of epistemic appraisal: it *would* be what gets so licensed. The way the world is could not, therefore, be independent of a set of descriptions which meets the relevant set of criteria of epistemic appraisal.[3]

Whereas anti-realists cannot conceive of a mind-independent reality because it is excessively constraining, they fully endorse a description-dependence that is self-constraining. As Paul K. Moser puts it, something "is description-dependent if and only if it depends for its existence on its being described."[4] That is to say, fearing an imposition from the world, the anti-realist stance imposes a set of "assertibility-conditions" on this same world that are inherently relative to our epistemic situation. Thus Dummett can write:

> Although facts indeed impose themselves upon us, however, we cannot infer from this that they were there waiting to be discovered before we discovered them, still less that they would have been there even if we had not discovered them. The correct image, on a justificationist view, is that of blind explorers encountering objects that spring into existence only as they feel around for them.[5]

Luckily enough, we are not "blind explorers." If I find a beer bottle while digging a planting hole in my garden, I shall not assume that it just appeared out of the blue but that it was probably left by the house-builders some time ago and had

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[1] Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 111, note 5.

[2] Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (London: Routledge, 1999), 223.

[3] *Ibid.*, 223–224. See also xix.

[4] Paul K. Moser, *Philosophy After Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 215.

[5] Michael Dummett, *Thought and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 92.

remained there all this time even if I was unaware of it. Laboratory analyses could actually be instructive about how long the bottle had been buried, when was it produced, etc. The truth of these facts—and of all the other facts I do not know about what is buried in my garden—belongs to the world, which is not, as Dummett believes, "formed from our exploration of it."[6] Part of this truth can arguably be recognized by us but there is much that will inevitably remain unknown.

The main idea explored in *Description of Situations*[7] is that, within an all-embracing epistemology, the world must be conceived as constant in spite of the multiple perspectives that subjects can adopt in various different contexts about it. I will call this view *context-sensitive objectivism* (CSO) and, as I have suggested elsewhere, it can be defined in the following way: "*S knows x iff x = a*."[8] CSO therefore implies that what is known by a certain subject (*S*) in a particular manner (*x*) must be presupposed as *knowledge*-independent (*a*). This, however, should not be seen as a relegation of the subject's epistemic role in the constitution of experience to a secondary position. The subject has an undeniably pivotal role in the contextualization of reality and that is why, in this epistemological account, a contextualist approach is needed. Apparently there would be a caveat: the fact that contextualism is closely related to relativism and subjectivism in epistemology. But the quest for objectivity cannot be made at the expense of our own access to the world, which is not epistemologically negotiable. In *Description of Situations* the subjective side is not disregarded in so far as the instancing of any *a* in a given *x* must be made by a putative subject. *Knowledge* is of course the result of a human activity. What is buried in my garden right now, unnoticed by anybody, bears no epistemic relation to reality whatsoever. Yet, it does have some relation—an *alethic* relation.

The typical solution to this problem found throughout the philosophical tradition was the correspondence theory of truth. Authors such as Aquinas, Kant and the early Wittgenstein have argued on different grounds that there must be a correspondence or agreement between our judgments and the things in the world, and that truth lies precisely in this match between thought and reality. Knowledge would then consist of true judgments whereas error would come out as the result of false judgments. The problem with this view is that the standard for knowing

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[6] *Ibid.*

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

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

something is fixed by our own cognitive achievements yielding an anthropocentrism about truth. In this way, the quasi-realism[9] pursued by Thomistic onto-theology, Kantian transcendentalism and Tractarian isomorphism simply pave the way for the anti-realist, pragmatic conception that is overtly anthropocentric. But what lies outside the scope of human apprehension cannot be seen as ontologically insignificant if a comprehensive alethic-epistemic relation is envisaged. So one of the immediate consequences of this relation is that what can be known by some subject becomes relevant to the truth of the world in the sense that a possibility is made actual. Nevertheless, this correspondence is just one of many possible correspondences that the world itself allows. It should thus come as no surprise that three important influences on the book have repudiated the correspondence thesis: Bolzano, Frege and Lewis.[10] The articulation between "propositions in themselves" and "truths in themselves" promoted by Bolzano is particularly apt to grasp what is beyond our reach. Peter Simons nicely summarizes Bolzano's view as follows:

> Bolzano ascribes truth and falsity in the primary sense to objective propositions, which are abstract entities expressed by linguistic sentences and entertained or thought in judgements. (…) Bolzano embraces these abstract propositions because he considers them the only way to guarantee the objectivity of knowledge. A proposition is true or false irrespective of whether anyone ever entertains, judges or believes it, and irrespective of whether it is ever put into words.[11]

Full-blooded epistemic contextualists like Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose would completely reject that a proposition could be considered without being asserted by someone. For them, the word "knowledge" is used according to the standards established by specific epistemic communities, which can be lower or higher. For that reason, there cannot be anything like "the objectivity of knowledge." Quite the contrary, "knowledge" is, on the contextualist account, essentially a relative concept akin to gradable predicates like "'flat,' 'bald,' 'rich,'

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[9] I am using the term literally, that is, as apparently but not really a realism, and not in the way popularized by Simon Blackburn after his *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), where a "quasi-realist" is regarded as "someone who 'starting from an anti-realist position finds himself progressively able to mimic the thoughts and practices supposedly definitive of realism'" (4).

[10] I deal specifically with Bolzano in Chapter 3, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth," Frege in Chapters 4 and 5, "Reality in Itself" and "Unthought Thoughts," and Lewis in Chapter 6, "Determinism and Possible Worlds."

[11] Peter Simons, "Austrian Philosophers on Truth," in *The Austrian Contribution to Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Mark Textor (London: Routledge, 2006), 159–183, here 160.

'happy,' 'sad'."[12] I find the idea of "the knowledge predicate" unsound.[13] There is surely no absolute sense for those adjectives, each use of them depending on a variety of factors. Without appealing to the context, their meaning would be totally indeterminate. But if my wife asks me whether I know where our copy of Shakespeare's works is and I answer "Yes, I know, it's in the living room bookcase," I am stating an entirely determinate fact. To be more precise, I am stating a plurality of undisputable facts.

Let us take stock. It seems uncontroversial that this everyday answer presupposes that I know much more than what is uttered in my sentence.[14] I know who Shakespeare is and this entails that I know what a human being is, in its difference from other living beings and inanimate objects. I know Shakespeare was an Englishman and hence I know what the concepts of citizenship, state, territory, etc. mean. I know he wrote in English and so I know what a language involves in terms of alphabet and grammar, and that there are many languages. I know Shakespeare was a playwright and poet, this presupposing that I know what playwrights and poets do, what comedies, histories, tragedies and poems look like, and so on and so forth. I know what a book is and what it means to own a copy of an author's works, thus knowing not only the activities of writing, printing and binding but also those of selling and buying, to mention only a few. I know that a living room forms part of a house, which has various rooms. I know what a bookcase is supposed to be, that it has shelves to hold books. And I know very well that my wife will put the book down somewhere and be unable to find it again. As Lewis said, "we know a lot."[15]

I imagine that some readers will shake their heads at this point and disagree that I *know* all these things. They will certainly grant that I know there was a man named William Shakespeare and that I know he was neither a horse or a sword, but they may cast doubt on whether I *know* what a human being truly is. Indeed, could I for instance explain the multifarious biological processes of the human

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[12] Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 57–89, here 60, and "Contextualism and Skepticism," *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000): 94–107, here 97. In the same vein, see Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *The Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 1–52, repr. in *The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–38, esp. 6.

[13] Cohen uses this expression on pages 61 and 98 of the aforementioned articles.

[14] The epistemic nature of presuppositions is the topic of Chapter 1 of my book, "Language and Reasoning."

[15] David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549–567, repr. in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 418–445, *passim*.

body? They will surely concede that I can ordinarily use concepts like citizenship, state or territory, but they may require demonstration that I *know* them as an expert in law or political science does. Even though they will naturally assume that I master a language and am acquainted with other languages, they will be cautious to say that I *know* about phonetics and syntax when compared to a linguist. I could go on to dissect the examples I gave but I think I have made my point clear. What these readers will contend against my ordinary use of "I know" is that it lacks epistemic justification and that this can only be given by a limited number of people called specialists in the relevant fields. Possibly, based on their own experience, they will not dispute my final inductive claim. I shall call these readers *justificationists* although not necessarily in the Dummettian sense.

There are however other readers who will shake their heads for different reasons. For some, this strong use of "I know" will be reminiscent of Plato's famous definition of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* as "true opinion plus a *logos*" in 201c, which was rejected by Plato himself and much later by Gettier as "justified true belief."[16] Plato's problem with this definition was basically one of incompleteness in regard to that *logos*—the "account" or "explanation." For instance, even if all leading scientists were to agree that they *justifiably* know (J-know, for short) the human biological processes, their claim, like any other scientific claim, could be incomplete and should consequently be taken as revisable. In the end, what is now J-known can turn out to be merely believed, including *falsely* believed in scenarios of radical paradigm shift. Supposed cases of J-knowing something would, in a revisionist picture, represent no more than higher levels of believing it, with knowledge as such appearing as unattainable.[17] This kind of reader will thus bring into question not only that I *know* what I am convinced I know but also that I shall ever be in a position to J-know it. I would not like to call them sceptics because their point is not wholly negative. I suggest calling them *finitists* about knowledge.

But there are obviously readers—fewer, I believe—who will claim that I can be completely under the illusion of knowing what I claim to know. They will not limit themselves to putting my epistemic position in question but they will forcefully deny that things really are what they look like. These are the proper *sceptics* and they have powerful arguments, which are essentially of two different

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[16] Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–123.

[17] I would venture to say that the paradox that results from Plato's definition of knowledge as "justified true belief" will have deeper consequences for epistemology than Gettier's paradoxes, which are eminently logical, although arguing for it would take me beyond the scope of the present discussion.

types. The first type of sceptical argument possesses, so to speak, a localized range and is not particularly problematic. For example, what unshakable guarantees do I have that Shakespeare was English and that he is the author of the works attributed to him? Even if I am pretty much persuaded that historians must be right in reporting that Shakespeare's baptism took place in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, a town that formed part of the kingdom of Queen Elizabeth I, no epistemological earthquake would happen if new evidence demonstrated that Shakespeare was after all born in Leith and thus a subject of Mary, Queen of Scots. This information would simply be added to the basket of our historical knowledge replacing the previous one. Similarly, as occasionally claimed even by non-philosophical sceptics, Shakespeare's works could have been written by somebody else, including a female author.[18] In the face of substantial evidence, we would simply reconsider our views about this oeuvre and scholars could set out to develop new compelling theories. Again, epistemologically speaking, things would remain exactly as they are.

It is worth noting that historical knowledge does not just comprise the kind of knowledge that arises from a strictly historical study but also what was communicated to us by family and friends or incorporated by us while watching a film or the news.[19] Mediate or testimonial knowledge is inherently fallible and indeed much more so than scientific knowledge. Yet, this fallibility is something we have learned to live with.

Things get more complicated when immediate knowledge is challenged. If I were asked how I can be sure that the volume of the alleged works of Shakespeare stands in my living room bookcase, I could say that I saw it downstairs minutes ago. Still, I would be relying first on the accuracy of both my initial perception and my recollection, and second on the fact that nothing else had happened—like my daughter taking the book to her room, which would fit into an amenable fallibilism. The radical sceptic will say that I am relying too much on experience. Here we are not talking about local sceptical scenarios, with their inherent fallibility, but of a mistrust with global proportions. What radical scepticism causes is a modal breakdown of our assent to the truth of the world, which has always been at hand. It is possible, though utterly unlikely, that my visual perception had deceived me, that my memory is disordered or, to be more pedantic, that the book

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[18] See the delightful piece "Was Shakespeare a Woman?" written by Elizabeth Winkler for *The Atlantic*, June 2019, available at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/who-is-shakespeare-emilia-bassano/588076/.

[19] This issue is discussed in Chapter 2 of my book, "What the World Is Made of."

was replaced with a fake one, as in home decor stores, when I turned my back on the shelves. For the radical sceptic, whatever is conceivable can happen.[20]

Contextualists have an important point to make about all this. They claim that their understanding of the concept of knowledge as a gradable predicate allows us to explain the various epistemic demands associated to its different uses. A contextualist would be perfectly comfortable with my use of "I know" when applied to who Shakespeare was, to what a human being is, to Shakespeare being English and author of the works published under his name, to my having a volume of those works in the bookcase downstairs, etc. The contextualist's fine-sounding argument is that each of these contexts determines a particular epistemic demand and therefore there is no contradiction, for example, between my saying that "I know" what a human being is and a biologist saying it. We will simply be employing an expression that obeys the various standards prompted by the situation. The trouble seems to come from our multidimensional use of "I know," which can be applied to the most mundane things as well as to highly specialized ones like Einstein's field equations. It is patently different to say that I know Einstein had a moustache and to say that I know what "$R_{ab} - \frac{1}{2}Rg_{ab} = T_{ab}$" means, but we can do no more than add qualifications in order to be more exact—e.g. to know *normally* and to know *in a specialized way*.

Epistemic contextualism however goes beyond the mere emphasis on the multidimensionality of "I know." This position encompasses a sophisticated reply to scepticism. In the case of localized sceptical doubts, the answer seems straightforward: the sceptic may well be right even though we need to adopt a pragmatic attitude which is irreconcilable with checking out every bit of our knowledge. Thus Cohen has no qualms about admitting a fallibilism governed by "criteria of relevance."[21] According to this view, it would make no sense to be suspicious about the real nature of the books in my bookcase but it could make sense to do so if I were at a home decor store. When it comes to global scenarios, the fallibilist conclusion is that radical scepticism should be seen as highly improbable though it cannot be entirely ruled out. Yet this is not the only contextualist version available in the market. A completely different response to the sceptic was articulated by Lewis. In a famous passage, we read that he "propose[s] to take the infallibility of knowledge as [his] starting point."[22] Does this mean that Lewis believed we can make no mistakes? Surely not. What it means is

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[20] I explore these themes in Chapter 8, "Radical Scepticism," Chapter 9, "Transcendentalism," and Chapter 10, "Bracketing Modality," in connection with Descartes, Kant and Husserl, respectively.
[21] Stewart Cohen, "How to be a Fallibilist," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 91–123, *passim.*
[22] Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," 422.

that it "just *sounds* contradictory" to say that we know such and such but can be mistaken, and that is why he does not see us as "caught between the rock of fallibilism and the whirlpool of scepticism."[23] Lewis' infallibilism is therefore targeted at those instances that the radical sceptic would be happy to debunk and that the fallibilist, even against her evidence, would be forced to put in question. Since the suspicion is only theoretical, not practical, things would go on exactly in the same way and the point made by Lewis is precisely that if it is so, neither fallibilism nor scepticism make any real change in our lives. The corollary is that, apart from cases of obvious fallibility, we are infallibilists about knowledge through and through. In fact, what Lewis acutely points out is that someone settled in their present situation—as we always are—cannot admit that the operative knowledge they possess is fallible. They definitely do not "hold contradictory opinions" about it. Either they are a non-sceptical infallibilist or they can try to be a sceptical infallibilist.[24]

This said, I do not think that Lewis gives the strongest arguments in favour of infallibilism. I am convinced that Wittgenstein's last writings on certainty offer a much broader picture of this landscape with his idea of "hinges" playing a key role in it.[25] But my interest in this matter is not limited to the efficacy of what Duncan Pritchard aptly dubbed "arational hinge commitments" as a weapon against radical scepticism.[26] I actually look at hinge epistemology as an essential tool for my realist framework capable of demonstrating that an objectivity lies behind the context-sensitivity of our knowledge ascriptions. I shall try to explain why.

The canonical distinction between early and later Wittgenstein, as intimately connected with the replacement of a realist view with an anti-realist one, seems to block my strategy. Is not the post-Tractarian philosophy aimed exactly at demonstrating that realism is an illusion and that everything amounts to a language game as a corollary of the autonomy of grammar? Take this passage from Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker as an example:

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[23] *Ibid.*, 419. As he writes elsewhere: "To hold contradictory opinions may or may not be risky, but it is in any case irrational." ("Why Conditionalize?", in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, 405)

[24] I naturally favour the first option. See Nuno Venturinha, "Non-sceptical Infallibilism," *Analysis* 80 (2020): 186–195.

[25] In my book, I devote part of Chapter 7, "Seeking Evidence," and Chapter 11, "Social Dependency," to this central theme from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and discuss in what way he can be called a contextualist.

[26] See Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 69, 89, 102–103 and 174–175.

> (…) grammar owes no homage to reality. It is, in this sense, autonomous. It does not reflect objective necessities. On the contrary, it determines what we conceive of as necessary.[27]

Although this holds true for Wittgenstein's so-called "middle period" and the *Philosophical Investigations*, I take the remarks collected in *On Certainty* as exhibiting a new trajectory of thought. I have long resisted the idea of a "third Wittgenstein" and remain convinced that much of what he wrote in the last years of his life was still meant for the *Investigations*,[28] which would have been a very different book than the one posthumously published had Wittgenstein lived longer.[29] But there are clearly innovative insights in *On Certainty* and what he says about "hinges" is particularly striking.[30] If we follow Pritchard and distinguish between "über hinge commitments," which are expressed in "über hinge propositions," and "personal hinge commitments," which in turn are expressed in "personal hinge propositions," these being by definition "non-über," then we have to admit that the "personal," i.e. cultural or epochal, anti-realist commitments/propositions necessarily revolve around the "über" realist commitments/propositions.[31] Some scholars have looked at Pritchard's claims suspiciously casting doubts on the way he maintains "the propositionality of hinges while making them the content of a peculiar attitude, different from belief, called 'commitment'"[32] or, in other words, on his "non-belief propositional attitude towards hinge commitments."[33] These worries can be warranted only if they are about what Pritchard calls *über hinges* for the *non-über hinges* are by definition

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[27] G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity—Essays and Exegesis of §§ 185–242. Volume 2 of an Analytical Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations, Second, extensively revised edition by P.M.S. Hacker (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 220. See also 46, 333 and 336, where in the same vein it is stated that "[g]rammar is not answerable to reality in the currency of truth."

[28] See Nuno Venturinha, "A Re-Evaluation of the *Philosophical Investigations*," in *Wittgenstein After His* Nachlass, ed. Nuno Venturinha (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 143–156.

[29] On the development of that book, see Nuno Venturinha (ed.), *The Textual Genesis of Wittgenstein's* Philosophical Investigations (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[30] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Revised edition by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), especially §§ 341, 343 and 655.

[31] See Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, especially 95–96, as well as his "Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing," *Synthese* 189 (2012): 267–268.

[32] Annalisa Coliva, "Strange Bedfellows: On Pritchard's Disjunctivist Hinge Epistemology," *Synthese* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-02046-z.

[33] Jonathan Nebel, "Doubting Pritchard's Account of Hinge Propositions," *Synthese* (2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02392-6.

believed. Even in those cases where we seem to be absolutely certain about something, like "the earth is round," what happens is that we "believe" this proposition as the result of an intricate worldview, which may not be the last word on the subject.[34] Our attitude towards the über hinges is different as long as they do not involve any belief susceptible to revision. Wittgenstein states for instance that a sentence of the form "I have a body" has no use in our language since any sentences we articulate inevitably presuppose it.[35] Phrases like "I know I have a body" or "I am sure I have a body" are indeed so tautological that, akin to the "propositions of logic" in the *Tractatus*, they "say nothing" amounting to "analytical propositions."[36] That is why it makes all sense to conceive of the hinge "I have a body" as a "commitment" rather than a "belief," which could be true or false. This hinge is obviously capable of propositional expression but it does not come with an alternative. True, I cannot suspend my "über hinge commitment" that expresses itself in this "über hinge proposition" and keep on doing what I used to do. Coliva recognizes that hinges "are not suited to be the content of a propositional attitude like belief," even though this "is, according to most, necessary for knowledge."[37] But the important lesson to be drawn from Pritchard's account is precisely that über hinges are not an object of knowledge (or ignorance) holding an epistemic status that is not comparable to that of the personal hinges— even if the latter belong to a class that also regulates in a decisive way our knowledge claims. As Pritchard himself puts it, "while our hinge commitments are not known, there is also a sense in which they are not unknown either."[38] For someone like Michael Williams, if we do not want to give in to the sceptic, then we must admit that "[f]ar from being arational commitments, 'hinge' propositions are known to be true."[39] However, to place the über hinges at an arational, non-epistemic level is, to my mind, the most effective defence against scepticism from a theoretical point of view. This way of understanding the matter avoids the

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[34] See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §§ 291 and 299.

[35] *Ibid.*, § 258.

[36] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.11.

[37] Coliva, "Strange Bedfellows."

[38] Duncan Pritchard, "Venturinha and Epistemic Vertigo," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1699–1704, here 1700. This is a commentary on my *Description of Situations* where Pritchard discusses some differences between our views. See additionally Nuno Venturinha, "Replies to Commentators," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1713–1724.

[39] Michael Williams, "The Indispensability of Knowledge," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1691–1697, here 1693. This is also a commentary on my *Description of Situations*, to which I respond in my "Replies to Commentators."

circularity of a Moorean response to the sceptic as well as the fragilities of standard contextualist perspectives. While himself a proponent of contextualism in epistemology, Williams suggests, and I absolutely agree, that "Wittgenstein is gesturing towards an 'infallibilist' conception of knowledge."[40] But Williams' infallibilism (which is in many ways reminiscent of the work of Lewis) appeals to an objectivity of certainty which, depending on each context, manoeuvres within the space of what for Pritchard would be mere personal hinges—with their inherent revisability. What is crucial in order to beat the radical sceptic is the overarching system formed by the über hinges as long as they are arationally, non-epistemically immune to doubt.

Good epistemological solutions usually come with a metaphysical price. In this case, the price is realism and I am happy to pay it. This brings us back to a humble position in the world, which is not enchanted by the amazingly powerful models that the human intelligence was able to construe establishing all our personal hinges. What Wittgenstein calls our attention to is that what falls within the scope of the über hinges, what is "beyond being justified or unjustified," is "something animal."[41] If the very basis of our knowledge is shared with other animals, as seems patently clear, this only shows how they are exceedingly wiser than radical sceptics. My cat can be deceived by the sound of a tin which she imagines is her favourite salmon mousse. But she will not doubt that she has legs as she runs to the kitchen. Bodily self-awareness and exposure to the external world are two basic characteristics of the animal kingdom, to which man belongs. It is of little surprise that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein also speaks abundantly about the acquisition of knowledge by children emphasizing how their fundamental certainties were apprehended quite early on, not after having learned a language but in the practice of language—*naturally*. This remark is illustrative:

> When a child learns language it learns at the same time what is to be investigated and what not. When it learns that there is a cupboard in the room, it isn't taught to doubt whether what it sees later on is still a cupboard or only a kind of stage set.[42]

And a bit further on he brings once again to the fore our animality endorsing a kind of zero logic:

> I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us.

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[40] Williams, "The Indispensability of Knowledge," 1694.

[41] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 359.

[42] *Ibid*., § 472.

Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.[43]

I think it is now clearer the route I travelled in *Description of Situations* and what CSO, the combination of context-sensitivity and objectivism, truly means. When Baker and Hacker affirm that "grammar owes no homage to reality," that "[i]t does not reflect objective necessities" or that "[g]rammar is not answerable to reality in the currency of truth," they are only half right. There is evidently no such thing in the "objective" world as books by Shakespeare lying on shelves, our grammar being indeed a sophisticated mode of organizing experience. But this structure is not random. Grammatically speaking, it is as correct to say that my copy of Shakespeare's works lies in my living room bookcase as it is to say that it does not. Both sentences would make perfect sense. Yet it makes a big difference to the world what the case is and what it is not. The anti-realist conceives of truth as simply the meeting of certain conditions set by certain communities of speakers. As we have seen, the "truth" of who Shakespeare was, of his authorship, etc. is in fact determined by what we establish as the standards for truth. Nevertheless, at the very bottom of everything that can be articulated about Shakespeare lies what in the last analysis makes our claims oscillate between what we call true and false—the way things are or were in reality. Of course the anti-realist can argue that we shall never know how things really are or were and that *the way things are or were in reality* is just another way of their appearing to us. I reject this story. Notwithstanding the systems of communication that human beings can create, there was someone who wrote the works of Shakespeare, under such and such circumstances, and so on and so forth. And there is something we call a book which is now occupying a place in space in what we call a bookcase. This object has its own chemical composition and is in a specific relation to other objects. Irrespective of the possible inaccuracy of our current chemistry and the concurrent descriptions provided by contemporary geometry and physics, the object has an existence of its own. Its intrinsic properties and extrinsic relations are reflected in the convergent but very different behaviours of mankind and other perceptive beings. Context-sensitivity is epistemically relevant for us, humans, as our form of correspondence with the world. But this is only one of many correspondences that, far from being arbitrary (as anti-realism is prone to emphasize) or privileged (as in anthropomorphic realism), are sanctioned by the objective world itself.

Before I conclude, let me say that there is a domain in which *Description of Situations* recognizes that CSO does not work: that of morality.[44] Javier González

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[43] *Ibid.*, § 475.
[44] I concentrate on this theme in the final chapter of the book, "Moral Matters."

de Prado calls my view "moral subjectivism"[45] and it really amounts to a "context-sensitive subjectivism" in virtue of the asymmetries between the theoretical and practical domains, which have different temporal dimensions—past and present, on the one hand, and future, on the other. Whether there can be *moral über hinges*, capable of grounding our actions, remains to be investigated.[46]

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[45] Javier González de Prado, "Akrasia and the Desire to Become Someone Else: Venturinha on Moral Matters," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1705–1711, here 1706. See also my "Replies to Commentators."