

A Neo-Wittgenstenian Approach to Rational Support Relations

Abstract

In contemporary discussions of Wittgenstein's epistemology as put forward in *On Certainty* (e.g. Pritchard (2012), Williams (2007) Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Stroll (1994), Coliva (2010a)), the notion of 'hinge propositions' takes center stage. A notorious objection to the hinge thesis, however, is that it stands in tension with the independently plausible principle that rational support transmits across competent deductions—the *transmission principle*. Rather than to explore whether the hinge thesis can be somehow rendered compatible with the transmission thesis, the aim of this paper will be to shift the focus to Wittgenstein's related thesis about rational support relations—namely, the thesis that for agent *S*, proposition *p* and reason *R*, *S* can be rationally adduced in support of *p* by *S* only if *R* is more certain for *S* than *p*. It is shown that Wittgenstein's rational support thesis—despite initial appearances—neither entails the hinge thesis nor incurs the transmission problem. As such, the thesis can stand on its own legs, apart from the rest of Wittgenstein's view, as a credible thesis about rational support relations. In the final sections of the paper, four different styles of counterexample to the Wittgenstenian rational support thesis are raised, and it is shown how each can be dealt with. Consequently, regardless of whether the hinge thesis is taken on board, Wittgenstein's rational support thesis remains a live option.

§1 Wittgenstein on the structure of reasons

As Wittgenstein (1969) sees it, Moore (1925) is simply in no position to claim to know he has hands¹. But this isn't because Wittgenstein thinks Moore is uncertain on the matter or anything less than stellar at spotting hands. Rather, the crux of the problem is that Moore isn't *more* certain of anything else. Wittgenstein observes that:

¹Moore also famously relies on his claim to know he has hands in his 'Proof of the External World' (1939).

My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.

That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (Wittgenstein (1969) §250)

Importantly for our purposes, Wittgenstein's diagnosis of Moore is a byproduct of his complex account of the structure of reasons as developed in *On Certainty*². Let's draw out (concisely) now the core theses that frame his position, beginning with a general rule about rational support relations, which the reasoning that features in the above passage is relying upon³:

RATIONAL SUPPORT: for agent *S*, proposition *p* and reason *R*, *R* can be rationally adduced in support of *p* by *S* only if *R* is more certain for *S* than *p*.

By reference to RATIONAL SUPPORT, it's evident that Moore is claiming to know something for which he cannot cite any supporting grounds (given that nothing is more certain for Moore than what he is claiming to know⁴). Now, for Wittgenstein, Moore's *claim to knowledge* in this case is objectionable precisely because claiming to know something represents one as being in a position to offer supporting grounds. Thus, Wittgenstein embraces, along with RATIONAL SUPPORT, something like:

KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION: If *S* asserts that *S* knows *p*, then *S* represents oneself as possessing (and being able to provide) supporting grounds for *p*⁵.

KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION and RATIONAL SUPPORT, taken together, offer a complete explanation for why Moore's claim to know he has hands is objectionable: by KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION, Moore commits himself to being

²Or, more broadly: Wittgenstein's account in OC is an account of a kind of epistemic language-game within which rational support and rational doubt make sense, and his account of the structure of reasons (which shall be our focus) is an element of this broader picture

³See, for instance, OC §77, §93, §111, §125, §138, §210, §243, §250, §282, §307.

⁴Or, for that matter, anyone else. The point would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to anyone in Moore's position.

⁵As Wittgenstein remarks in OC §243, 'One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth...But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows...'. See here also, for example, §18, §40, §91, §432. Cf. Unger (1975, p. 256) for a related argument to the effect that 'Asserting that something is so entails not just representing the thing as being so, but representing oneself as knowing that it is'.

able to provide supporting grounds that, by RATIONAL SUPPORT, he doesn't have.

But Wittgenstein's view runs deeper. As Pritchard (2011, p. 527) notes, while Wittgenstein adduces RATIONAL SUPPORT in the service of making a point about our *claims to know*, 'the picture [of the structure of reasons] doesn't seem to only apply to reasons *qua* reasons offered in support of a claim to know⁶. Suppose, for example, that one were to simply reflect on the epistemic standing of one's belief that one has two hands.' If one were to do so, then by RATIONAL SUPPORT, such a belief would not be rationally supported, as there is nothing more certain for one that could be taken as evidence for it. Wittgenstein is of course aware that an array of propositions are like this: he calls these propositions we hold fast in this way 'hinge propositions'.

HINGE: For S, p , if there is no q such that (by RATIONAL SUPPORT) q can be rationally adduced by S as grounds for p , then p is *arational* for S (that is: S can be neither rationally supported nor rationally doubted).

Just as hinge propositions cannot be rationally supported, neither can they be rationally doubted (e.g. OC §317, §322, §342); to doubt a hinge proposition would be to at the same time call into question the wider belief-system⁷. (OC §115, §186). As Wittgenstein notes:

If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand, for *this* reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not⁸. (OC §231).

It is worth emphasising, as Pritchard (2011) has, that the status of 'being beyond doubt' is playing an entirely different role for Wittgenstein than the role this very same status famously played for Descartes (*Cf.* OC §204). Where as, for Descartes, being beyond doubt was supposed to be a guarantor of truth and of certain knowledge, 'being beyond doubt' does not indicate,

⁶Indeed, Wittgenstein is explicit about this in OC §91 where he commits himself to the view that having 'the right ground for [one's] conviction' is a necessary condition on knowledge. Wittgenstein indicates also in this passage that he takes this view to be Russell's.

⁷As Wittgenstein remarks in OC §225, 'What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions'.

⁸Consider here also Wittgenstein's remark that 'If a blind man were to ask me "Have you got two hands?" I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have and doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands. *What* is to be tested by *what*? OC §125. *Cf.* here also §154, §231, §247, §322.

for Wittgenstein, that the proposition in question is *true* (e.g. §403, §404)⁹. Rather, being beyond doubt is a mark of a proposition that plays a *necessary* role within a broader system within which rational support and doubt are themselves *possible*¹⁰. That hinge propositions are beyond support and doubt is necessary in that it is ‘part of the very logic’ of our investigations (OC §343) that ‘certain things are in deed’ not doubted... ‘if I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.’

§2 The hinge thesis and the transmission problem

By taking on board RATIONAL SUPPORT, KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION and HINGE, Wittgenstein offers a kind of ‘complete picture’ of the what he takes to be the kind of language-game within which epistemic evaluations make sense (e.g. OC §3, §18, §24, §196, §204). Let’s call (for convenience sake) the conjunction of these three theses the ‘complete Wittgenstenian view’¹¹.

As many commentators are aware, the HINGE thesis—the most striking component of the complete Wittgenstenian view—has some potentially remarkable ramifications; it has, for instance, been used to motivate sceptical, anti-sceptical¹² as well as relativist¹³ arguments¹⁴. We won’t rehearse these different views here.

Rather, at this point, it will be important to note that the hinge thesis invites a certain kind of notorious trouble, which can be drawn out clearly when we consider the relationship between hinge and *non*-hinge propositions.

Consider here, following Pritchard¹⁵, the relationship between the following two propositions:

⁹Malcolm (1988, p. 280) notes that ‘Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that when a human being is objectively certain of something, when any doubt about it would strike him as nonsensical, when he cannot conceive how it could be false—it does not follow that this is so!’.

¹⁰See here OC §115, where Wittgenstein remarks that the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.

¹¹Note that this choice of terminology is only one of convenience, to distinguish the package of the three theses from Wittgenstenian pictures (such as the one I’ll be considering in detail) that endorse some but not all of these core theses. Obviously, Wittgenstein’s contribution in epistemology outstrips these three theses.

¹²Consider, for one thing, that an implication of HINGE is that we cannot call *all* our beliefs into question in one fell swoop, which is precisely the kind of strategy employed in radical sceptical arguments. For some interpretations of the hinge thesis in the service of anti-sceptical projects, see, for instance, Wright (1991), Stroll (1994).

¹³For example, Rorty (1979), Boghossian (2006). *Cf.* Coliva (2010b) and Kusch (2013)

¹⁴See McGinn (2008) for a helpful overview, particularly regarding sceptical and anti-sceptical interpretations.

¹⁵(Pritchard here is drawing from Wittgenstein’s own example at OC §183).

A: *Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805.* [Non-hinge]

B: *The Earth did not just spring into existence five minutes ago.* [Hinge]

It seems a point of obviousness that if I have good epistemic grounds for *A*, than I do just as well for *B*, which I can competently deduce from the *A*¹⁶. The epistemic principle that captures this, more broadly, is the principle that epistemic justification or warrant transmits across competent deductions—the *transmission principle*:

TRANSMISSION PRINCIPLE If *S* knows that ϕ in virtue of rational support *R*, and *S* competently deduces ψ from ϕ , thereby forming her belief that ψ on the basis of this competent deduction while retaining her *R*-supported knowledge that ϕ , then *S* knows that ψ in virtue of *R*¹⁷.

With reference to the transmission principle, Pritchard (2012, p. 6) captures the dilemma that materialises for the proponent of HINGE as follows:

...with [the transmission principle] in play it ought to be possible for the rationally articulate subject to undertake competent deductions from their rationally supported knowledge of non-hinge propositions [e.g. Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805] and in doing so gain rationally supported knowledge of hinge propositions [e.g. The Earth did not just spring into existence.].

But, of course, the result that one can in this way gain rational support of a hinge proposition involves the rejection of HINGE. So, either the transmission principle or HINGE must go.

§3 Cleaving up the view

There are a number of ways one might try to finesse HINGE so as to get around the transmission problem, and each involves certain kinds of concessions, but we won't delve into these here¹⁸. Rather, it will be instructive to

¹⁶Imagine for a moment how strange it would be to say you take yourself to be in a *worse* position vis-a-vis the latter than the former. Given that the former entails the latter, we could think of a belief in *A* as a conjunctive belief that *A* and *B* are so. But to be more confident that *A* and *B* are true than that *B* is true will be to commit what have called the Conjunction Fallacy. See Tversky and Kahneman (1983). Cf. DeRose (1995) on 'abominable conjunctions'.

¹⁷See Pritchard (2012, p. 15). Cf. Wright (2000).

¹⁸For a concise critical discussion of three notable approaches on this score, see Pritchard (2011, §3). Pritchard specifically refers to an *externalist* strategy, an *internalist* strategy involving entitlements and thirdly a *non-propositional* strategy.

take a step back and consider that while the transmission problem is a problem for what we called the Wittgenstenian complete view (recall: the conjunction of RATIONAL SUPPORT, KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION and HINGE), this is *specifically* because the complete view involves a commitment to HINGE.

Now it would be natural to suppose that HINGE is entailed by RATIONAL SUPPORT (or, perhaps more weakly, that it would be implausible to maintain RATIONAL SUPPORT without also accepting HINGE). After all, it seems, *prima facie*, that it is precisely *because* one can't adduce reasons in favour of those propositions that are more certain than any reasons we could offer in favour of them, that we are left at the end of the day with hinge propositions. And furthermore, since KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION could be rejected only on pain of rejecting an independently plausible condition on epistemically appropriate assertion¹⁹, it would be plausible to think that one who accepts RATIONAL SUPPORT will thereby endorse the complete Wittgenstenian view. More concisely, this is because RATIONAL SUPPORT entails HINGE and KNOWLEDGE-ASSERTION is independently plausible.

But on closer inspection, this is not quite right, and that it is not will be important to what follows. RATIONAL SUPPORT and HINGE actually come apart in both directions, and in a way that opens up space for one to endorse Wittgenstein's account of the structure of reasons while rejecting the more controversial HINGE thesis²⁰

§4 Hinges and the rational support thesis

While a bit of reflection shows that HINGE does not entail RATIONAL SUPPORT²¹, what is of particular relevance for our purposes will be that RATIO-

¹⁹Consider, for instance, the claim put forward by proponents of the justification norm of assertion—*viz.*, roughly, that S's assertion that *p* is epistemically appropriate only if is epistemically justified in believing *p*. Plausibly, KA can be understood as an instance of the justification norm because we can simply substitute claims to know for '*p*' in the justification norm. For some notable defences of the justification norm of assertion, see Lackey (2007), Douven (2006) and Kvanvig (2009).

²⁰That there is space for such a proposal is important in that (as we noted in §1) Wittgenstein often relies on RATIONAL SUPPORT to make claims *about* hinge propositions, the RATIONAL SUPPORT thesis itself is entirely general: it is a thesis about what can be taken as a reason for what. As such, it will be of philosophical interest regardless of whether HINGE is taken on as an additional commitment.

²¹ RATIONAL SUPPORT is not entailed by HINGE for this reason: there could be hinge propositions, with the properties they have, where their having the properties they have needn't be a matter of their being more certain than the reasons that could be adduced for them. One could endorse HINGE, thus, alongside a denial of RATIONAL SUPPORT. Cf. a bizarre view according to which all propositions are hinge propositions would be an extreme way to endorse hinge without incurring a commitment to also endorsing RATIONAL SUPPORT. Of course, this would be a bizarre position. But the point is only made in demon-

NAL SUPPORT does not entail HINGE. There are a number of ways to make this point.

One might do so by appealing to something like Burge's (1993) *Acceptance Principle*, according to which 'A person is entitled to accept something as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so'. Burge (1993, p. 467) Consider that proponent of RATIONAL SUPPORT who endorses the Acceptance Principle can reject HINGE. After all, propositions that will otherwise be ruled-in as hinge propositions are (*contra* HINGE) *not* arational for *S*, by reference to the Acceptance Principle. And this is unobjectionable by the lights of RATIONAL SUPPORT given what confers the justificatory status on our most certain propositions is not *other beliefs* which are being taken as reasons to believe these more certain beliefs.

But this strategy making use of the Acceptance Principle is only one way to make the point. A more generalised argument can be given that does not require adherence to the Acceptance Principle (or anything like it): the general line of argument is that what RATIONAL SUPPORT leaves us with at the end of the day is just that there will be some propositions for which rational support cannot be inferential (e.g. on the basis of other propositions). But notice that it is an open question, for proponents of RATIONAL SUPPORT, how these propositions in question might gain their justificatory status. Perhaps non-inferentially²². Perhaps by coherence with other beliefs²³, where the justification is a function of a belief-system rather than of any *particular* supporting reasons²⁴. In any such case, it is precisely because inferential justification from more certain beliefs is not the only way a belief can be rational for one to hold that hinge needn't follow from rational support.

§5 The rational support thesis and the transmission problem

Although RATIONAL SUPPORT doesn't entail HINGE, the thesis would inherit some of the same baggage were it to (no less than HINGE) face the transmission problem. I shall show now that RATIONAL SUPPORT does *not*, in fact, run afoul of the transmission thesis. An upshot of this result, of course, will

strating that HINGE needn't entail RATIONAL SUPPORT.

²²As is plausibly the case for at least some self-knowledge. See here Boghossian (1989).

²³See here Bonjour (1985, pp. 97-99) for conditions for a system to count as coherent. A belief's status of epistemic justification will be a function of properties of the system of beliefs, and thus will acquire a kind of rational basis that is both incompatible with HINGE and not through what would be by RATIONAL SUPPORT an objectionable route via the basis of a less certain belief.

²⁴For a recent, non-traditional appeal to coherence within the scope of a virtue-theoretic epistemology, see Sosa (2011).

be that we will be in a good position to evaluate the thesis on its own terms as a kind of position that could be endorsed *regardless* of whether one wishes to take on board the fuller Wittgenstenian picture (and thus without automatically inheriting the kinds of problems that notoriously crop up for the full picture).

To make the point, let's return to the transmission problem *vis-a-vis* proponents of the hinge thesis; recall here the example previously considered:

A: *Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805.* [Non-hinge]

B: *The Earth did not just spring into existence five minutes ago.* [Hinge]

The issue facing proponents of the hinge thesis was of course that, with reference to the transmission principle, S's rational support R for (A)—which will be S's grounds for believing what S does about Napoleon—should be at the same time rational support for propositions S competently deduces from A, such as B^{25} . But, *a la* HINGE, there is going to be no R such that R can be rationally adduced in support of B^{26} . Thus, it looked like HINGE or the transmission principle must go.

Even though, as we've shown, RATIONAL SUPPORT does not entail HINGE (and so does not simply *inherit* the transmission problem from HINGE), the question remains: does this restriction *vis-a-vis* what can be adduced as a reason for what entailed by RATIONAL SUPPORT *also* prevent S's justification for A to transmit to S's justification for B?

A natural answer here will be to say that it does. The general reasoning in play here is something like the following: if ϕ cannot be rationally adduced in support of ψ then epistemic support for ϕ can not transmit to ψ . This general principle would thus explain why the commitment of RATIONAL SUPPORT that A can't be adduced as rational support of B prevents the justification I have for A to transmit across my competent deduction from A to B.

But the general principle turns out to be a dubious one. To bring this point into view, just reflect on what one is doing when one adduces a proposition *as* rational support for another, *viz.*, one is endorsing (implicitly or explicitly, in the case of offering a proof) a *piece of reasoning*. When this endorsement of a piece of reasoning is made explicit, in adducing a proposition as rational support for another, one is—as Wright (2002) puts it—attempting to bring one to rational conviction of one proposition on the basis of an-

²⁵See Pritchard (2010) for a detailed discussion of competent deduction as is involved in the transmission thesis.

²⁶This of course includes whatever R one has for A (which, by transmission, should also be support for B).

other²⁷. More simply: in adducing one proposition ϕ as rational support for another, ψ , one is offering ϕ as a rational *basis* that would suffice for accepting ψ .

The key to seeing why RATIONAL SUPPORT does not incur the transmission problem is appreciating how the justification or warrant claimed (by the transmission thesis) to transmit across competent deductions does not involve any further claim to the effect that the former is claimed as a rational basis of the latter. This point needs some unpacking, and we can do this easily with our example propositions, *A* and *B*. By RATIONAL SUPPORT, *A* cannot be rationally adduced in support of *B*. But notice that the justification that would transmit from the grounds from *A* to *B* needn't have this implication. Suppose, *ex hypothesi*, that the transmission principle is true, and my grounds for believing the proposition about Napoleon also transmit as grounds for my believing that the world didn't recently come into existence. Now, as Evans (2012) notes, a plausible constraint on my adducing my Napoleon belief as a rational basis for my belief that the world didn't just come into existence, is that, *were* I to give up my Napoleon belief, I would revise my belief (in some way) about the world coming into existence. This general necessary condition on basing is a kind of dispositional basing constraint; Evans offers the following principle:

DISPOSITIONAL BASING CONSTRAINT: *S*'s belief that *p* is based on *q* only if *S* is disposed to revise her belief that *p* when she loses *q*²⁸.

If you were to suddenly learn that (due to biased historians, and some political ploy to aggrandize French reputation) Napoleon didn't actually win the battle of Austerlitz but instead settled for a tie, would you *in any way* revise your belief that the world did not just recently come into existence? Surely not. You are thus not (even partly) basing your belief about the world's existence on the belief about Napoleon, and this is compatible with the justification for the former transmitting to the latter²⁹, and for the simple reason

²⁷See, for instance, Wright (2002, 332). Or, for that matter, articulating one's own piece of reasoning to oneself, outwith the context of an audience to which one is directing the piece of reasoning.

²⁸This principle owes to Evans (2012, p. 10) with minor presentational modification. Note that this dispositional basing constraint is not a theory of epistemic basing. The leading substantive theories of epistemic basing are the causal and doxastic accounts, each of which proposes substantive positive conditions for proper basing. See here Korcz (2000) for an overview. This constraint can be viewed rather as a kind of adequacy constraint, broadly analogous to the 'anti-luck' constraint on knowledge.

²⁹Consider for instance that if I am already .99 confident that Jim has disease *D* and then receive a test that indicates it is .85 likely that Jim has *D*, then even though the justification

that not every source of justification for a given belief, ϕ is such that, were we to lose that source, we would revise our belief that ϕ ³⁰. This much is ensured by the dispositional basing constraint.

§6 The rational support thesis: some objections

At this point, we can see how a kind of neo-Wittgenstenian account of the structure of reasons–RATIONAL SUPPORT–can, at least in principle, stand apart cleanly from Wittgenstein’s wider philosophical project³¹. This allows us to evaluate Wittgenstein’s thesis about rational support without ever raising and addressing the familiar issues that arise when evaluating the broader project with its hinge foundations. For ease of reference, the thesis claims:

RATIONAL SUPPORT: for agent S , proposition p and reason R , R
can be rationally adduced in support of p by S only if R is more

for accepting the veracity of the test and what it indicates transmits to the proposition (of which you are already .99 certain) that Jim has D , it doesn’t follow that you are basing your belief that Jim has D on the new piece of evidence. By reference to the dispositional basing constraint, were we to lose the belief about the new piece of evidence, we would not in any way revise our belief that Jim has D . In fact, we’d be right back where we started, holding that belief with .99 certainty. Thanks to [REFERENCE SUPPRESSED] for discussion on this point.

³⁰It is of course compatible with the dispositional basing constraint that, in many cases, we have a multiplicity of bases for a belief that ϕ . For instance, my belief that Kennedy was the first Catholic to be assassinated while President is based in part on my belief that Kennedy was Catholic, in part on my belief that he was a U.S. President and in part on my belief that he was assassinated, as well as in part on the belief that no Catholic president in office was assassinated before him. The dispositional basing requirement predicts rightly that losing any of these beliefs on which I base my belief in the target proposition (e.g. if I lost my belief that Kennedy was Catholic) would involve revision of the target belief, that he was the first Catholic assassinated as president. That said, it is important that being a partial basis of a belief is a necessary but not sufficient condition that a reason (itself) could be adduced in support of a proposition. Consider, for instance, that although my belief that Kennedy is Catholic is part of my basis for believing Kennedy was the first assassinated Catholic US President, I do not endorse just the belief that Kennedy was Catholic as an adequate reason for believing that Kennedy was the first Catholic US President to be assassinated.

³¹I am saying ‘neo-Wittgenstenian’ because, although RATIONAL SUPPORT is an ingredient of Wittgenstein’s complete position, Wittgenstein did not endorse his own rational support thesis in isolation from the hinge thesis. And, accordingly, Wittgenstein’s employment of RATIONAL SUPPORT was always with the purview of viewing rational support relations as essentially *local*. This was after all an implication of the hinge thesis. For this reason, it simply isn’t the case that Wittgenstein **would** accept RATIONAL SUPPORT as a general principle apart from the hinge thesis—he didn’t. Thus, I am not attributing the principle, abstracted from the rest of the proposal, to Wittgenstein, even though Wittgenstein did embrace this principle *within* his broader system. Thanks to [REFERENCE SUPPRESSED] for discussion on this point.

certain for S than p .

Wittgenstein seems to find RATIONAL SUPPORT an obvious datum of rationality, as obvious as the more general metaphor that we use what is more certain to test what is less certain, and not the other way around³²—and his cases (e.g. the case of Moore claiming to know he has hands on the basis of his eyesight) speak strongly in favor of just sort of a general thesis about the structure of rational support.

But even if RATIONAL SUPPORT is intuitive and—as we’ve seen—is not encumbered by the transmission problem, it’s not at all clear that rational support should be taken on board. As with any general thesis, we’ll need to see how RATIONAL SUPPORT stands up against a range of counterexamples.

I’ll now turn to four such cases that stand, each for different reasons, to undermine RATIONAL SUPPORT. These cases are (put roughly) threshold cases, stakes cases, logical inference cases, and what I’ll call ‘subversive basing’ cases. We’ll look at each in turn and, in the next section, examine how the proponent of RATIONAL SUPPORT might reply.

Case 1: Wesley has been exhibiting symptoms consistent with Multiple Sclerosis. Accordingly, Wesley’s GP, Alyson has conducted blood tests, referred Wesley to a neurologist, as well as to a specialist for an MRI. As MS is notoriously difficult to diagnose, Alyson (who’s credence is around .6 at this point, suppose, *ex hypothesi* just short of belief³³) decides to refer Wesley to yet another specialist for a spinal tap in order to assess whether Wesley’s cerebrospinal fluid contains oligoclonal bands that are indicative of MS. The specialist who conducts Wesley’s spinal tap is under litigation for malpractice and is not very reliable. The results come in positive. This final bit of evidence, however, is enough to bring Alyson from agnosticism to belief that Wesley has MS.

Case 1 offers a straightforward kind of ammunition for rejecting the conditional claim made by RATIONAL SUPPORT. The idea here is that Alyson is less certain in the veracity of the testimony about Wesley’s spinal tap than she ever was *vis-a-vis* the proposition that Wesley has MS; *but*—and the idea this counterexample is meant to exploit—even a (say) .51 certainty *vis-a-vis*

³²See, for instance, OC §125.

³³In this example, I am using credence to model certainty, but this is only for ease of exposition. Certainty needn’t be modeled this way, and the thrust of the point does not require credence. For instance, the same point could be made by representational states. See [REFERENCE SUPPRESSED].

the testimony of the spinal tap specialist may well be enough to rationally bring Alyson over the Lockean threshold³⁴ from agnosticism to belief in the target proposition—and this is so *even though* Alyson was antecedently more confident in the target proposition (say, .6) than she ever was in the reason in question. Thus, Case 1 illuminates at least one line of argument that can be advanced against RATIONAL SUPPORT.

Stakes-cases bring to focus another strategy for resisting RATIONAL SUPPORT. In particular, the idea that would seem to spell trouble for rational support is that a proposition that would ordinarily suffice for one as a reason more certain for one than some proposition p , can be rendered less certain than p precisely because of certain stakes that lower the agent's certainty *vis-a-vis* the reason, but *not vis-a-vis* the target proposition. Consider the following case:

Case 2: Kasper always puts up a sign on the highway that indicates whether the town's bank is open. Kasper's brother, Torben, (who has no particular reason to care whether the bank is open today) worries that there is a very small chance that Kasper has been kidnapped overnight and that the abductor has merely erected the sign as Kasper would have (but with no regard to whether the bank is actually open). Normally, Torben comes to believe, each day, whether the bank (with frequently changing hours) is open on the basis of his brother's sign. Today, he also comes to believe the bank is open because the sign says so; however, the threat of his brother's abduction leaves him less certain the sign is genuine than that the bank is open.

The intuition Case 2 attempts to elicit is that Torben can take the information on the sign as a rational grounds for believing the bank is open, even though—thanks to the importance for Torben that he not lose his brother—Torben is far less certain than he usually is in the veracity of the information offered by the sign³⁵.

A third kind of case that stands in *prima facie* tension with RATIONAL SUPPORT is a case in which one articulates an inference according to a logical rule. Consider the following:

Case 3: Tim learns the disjunction introduction rule in his Introduction to Logic Class. He realises that from p he can get

³⁴The example is of course couched in something like the Lockean theory of belief. However, the example does not require that we do. The same point could be modeled using only credences.

³⁵And, to reiterate, the operative stakes here are orthogonal for Torben, *vis-a-vis* whether the bank is actually open. He doesn't care whether the bank is open.

$(p \vee q \vee r)$. He had never before considered the disjunctive proposition $(p \vee q \vee r)$ but now holds this occurrent belief, having inferred it from p .

The rub of this objection is that it would seem that: Tim takes p as rational support for $(p \vee q \vee r)$ even though Tim is equally certain of both propositions³⁶.

A final kind of case that also seems to raise trouble for RATIONAL SUPPORT is a case—originally due to Lehrer (1971)—that features what I’ll call (for lack of a better term) ‘subversive basing’. Here I paraphrase a case that has featured at the fore of discussions about the basing relation (in particular, against causal theories of the epistemic basing relation).

Case 4: A series of eight murders has been committed, and all the evidence seems to suggest Bob is guilty of all eight murders. David is a mystic, and is Bob’s lawyer. David has complete faith in what the Tarot cards say. The Tarot cards tell David that Bob is innocent of the eighth murder (and so David comes to believe this on the basis of the cards). But David knows reference to Tarot cards won’t hold up in court. A good lawyer, David mines through evidence searching for an argument that would be admissible in the courtroom, and which will indicate his client is innocent. David finds such an argument. Though the argument is complicated—he does recognise that it shows that his client is innocent. However, given the emotional factors surrounding the case, this complicated line of reasoning is incapable of causing David to believe that Bob is innocent. Nonetheless, plausibly, David is justified on the basis of the complicated line of reasoning in believing that his client is innocent, given that the lawyer takes the complicated line of reasoning seriously³⁷.

This fourth case is more complicated than the other three. There are two steps to showing how the case threatens RATIONAL SUPPORT. The first step is to claim (as Lehrer did), that the lawyer is justified in believing his client is innocent. If this much is granted, then (as Lehrer suggested), since justification requires proper basing, the lawyer’s belief must be properly based

³⁶He is, thus, not *more* certain of what is playing the role of his supporting reason, than he is of the proposition in favour of which he adduces the reason.

³⁷I am paraphrasing here closely the presentation of the case offered by Korcz (1997), and which owes to Lehrer. This case, known under the description as the ‘Gypsy Lawyer’ case, generated a lot of discussion in the 1970s and 1980s literature on the basing relation. Specifically, this case was designed as a counterexample to causal theories of the basing relation. See here, again, Korcz (1997). I am, to be clear, adducing this case in the service of an entirely different aim.

on the complicated line of reasoning³⁸. But, *ex hypothesi*, the lawyer is not certain of this complicated line of reasoning at all (and, given his faith in the cards), is much *more* certain of the *conclusion* that his client is innocent. Accordingly, we seem to have a case where a subject, the lawyer, can rationally adduce a reason in support of a proposition, whereby the reason is less certain for the subject than the proposition for which the reason is offered as support.

§7 The rational support thesis, defended

It will be suggested now that none of the four styles of counterexample raised in the previous section requires that we give up ON RATIONAL SUPPORT. At any rate, we'll see that there are plausible lines of response that can be given in each case. What results, then, is that RATIONAL SUPPORT not only is (as we've seen) not done in by the transmission problem, but neither is it done in by any of the four kinds of counterexamples considered.

Threshold cases

The challenge posed by Case 1 to RATIONAL SUPPORT might be diffused, firstly, by denying that a rational agent (in this case, an expert)—who has already had the intellectual sobriety to remain all-things-considered agnostic—will be rationally compelled to believe that Wesley has MS simply upon the acquisition of the impoverished piece of evidence Alyson acquires. Perhaps, after all, given the institutional role Alyson occupies, such impoverished evidence will never suffice as a rational difference maker³⁹.

But let's assume for the sake of argument, that the bit of evidence were to play this role of 'tipping the Lockean scales' and thus bringing Alyson to all-out belief that Wesley has M.S. Even granting this, there is good reason to resist that Case 1 counts against RATIONAL SUPPORT. The point to emphasise here is that, even though Alyson would (in retrospect) rightly *describe* this piece of evidence as part of her rationale for believing Wesley has MS, she would never endorse the testimony from the spinal tap specialist as a good reason to believe Wesley has MS⁴⁰.

³⁸And, thus, all the worse for causal theories of the basing relation—or so the argument went.

³⁹For a discussion of how institutional norms, particular in medical contexts in which doctors are making diagnoses on evidence, epistemic standards are higher than usual, see Lackey (2011).

⁴⁰Indeed, her evidence from Wesley's spinal tap specialist would not suffice, on its own, as rational support for accepting that Tim has MS, even though (by reference to the dispositional basing requirement) it is part of her basis.

The significance of this point is drawn out helpfully in Adam Leite's (2004); (2008) recent work on the normativity of the practice of epistemic reason-giving⁴¹. When one sincerely declares, after reflection upon the available reasons, that *R* is one's reason for believing proposition *p*, one is not *merely* issuing a hypothesis (as one would be doing when offering an explanatory reason), but instead taking up a normative position, one which opens us up to epistemic criticism and further normative consequences. Here's Leite:

Holding a belief for a particular reason is a complex attitude of the person a matter of taking up a normative position which links the belief and the reasons in a way that opens up the possibility of evaluating the person on their basis. It involves, in particular, endorsement of certain considerations as adequate reasons for holding the belief and a commitment to give up the belief (or appropriately hedge one's conviction and seek better reasons) if those reasons prove inadequate. A person with proper background capacities can explicitly take on such commitments in the course of her deliberative and justificatory activity.

Clearly, though, Alyson is not endorsing the spinal tap results as a good reason for believing that Wesley has MS. But since RATIONAL SUPPORT is a principle governing the practice of epistemic reason-giving, it is not at all clear Alyson's would, in being disposed to describing the belief as part of her basis while *not* being disposed to endorse it as itself an adequate reason for believing the target proposition, violating the principle.

Stakes cases

The worry raised in Case 2 was (in sum) that Torben could rationally adduce the evidence proffered by the sign as a reason to believe the bank is open, *even though*—given that a risk to his brother's welfare becomes salient—Torben's certainty in the reason is artificially lowered and *ex hypothesi*, drops below Torben's certainty that the bank is open.

One straightforward route to resisting the force of this example is to object to a certain feature claimed to hold in the case—namely, that Torben's

⁴¹Leite's target is what he calls the spectatorial view, according to which one's offering a reason for one's belief is to be understood as describing, rather than endorsing, one's basis. This has been the dominant assumption in discussions of the basing relation since Harman's (1970) influential paper 'Knowledge, Reasons and Causes', in which Harman criticised what Leite notes as the last strand of contrary thinking: Lehrer's 1965 Gettier-response paper in which he denied basing in terms of what one would say to justify one's belief

certainty *vis-a-vis* the bank proposition really is insensitive to his certainty *vis-a-vis* the evidence about the sign⁴². Recall that the suggestion for how Torben's certainty *vis-a-vis* his evidence could drop below his certainty *vis-a-vis* the bank proposition traded on the idea that salience of the worry about Kasper would be relevant only to the belief about the sign, leaving Torben's confidence *vis-a-vis* the bank proposition as it would be otherwise. But there is room to resist this suggestion.

To see how, we might consider applying the 'past-self' test. Let T_2 be a time shortly after Torben has come to believe the bank is open on the basis of the sign. Would Torben regard his previous self at T_1 —at the time of the inference—as having been *more* certain that the bank was open than that the sign was genuine (and thus accurate?) It is hard to see how he would. After all, it is part of the case that the sign constitutes Torben's only evidence about the status of the bank. More plausibly, Torben would insist (on reflection) that, at T_1 as his certainty about the veracity of the sign drops, then the same goes for his certainty that the bank is open⁴³. But given that this is plausible, the force of the case dissolves (as a counterexample to RATIONAL SUPPORT) insofar as its force as a counterexample relied on the supposition that Torben's certainty *vis-a-vis* the bank proposition would stay fixed.

Logical inference cases

Regarding the third problem, although Tim believes p and believes the disjunction he infers from it by applying an inference rule, he is engaging in an activity very different from the activity one is undertaking when adduces a reason in support of a belief. RATIONAL SUPPORT is a thesis about what can be taken *as a reason* for what. In the case we have here, Tim merely notices (after learning an inference rule) that one thing follows from another thing, in a way that is truth-preserving.

Now, to be fair, we could adjust the disjunction introduction case so that Tim actually appears to be taking a proposition as a reason for believing a disjunction in which the proposition features. We may, for instance, represent the claim that someone from the Rat Pack—Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford, or Joey Bishop—committed the murder as the disjunction $(p \vee q \vee r \vee s \vee t)$. Tim might thus (in the context of conver-

⁴²This was, of course, an aspect of the case meant to ensure that Torben would end up less certain of his evidence than of the proposition for which he took it as a reason—*viz.*, that the bank was open.

⁴³To a point, that is—once Torben's confidence in the veracity of the sign is lowered to a point that renders Torben's confidence that the bank is open to be .50, further lowering in his confidence of the veracity of the sign will not have the effect of lowering Torben's confidence that the bank is open below .5 (or whatever is stipulated to be the baseline confidence).

sation with a stubborn defender of the morality of the Rat Pack) adduce the claim that p —that Sinatra was the killer—as a reason for accepting that one of the Rat Pack members committed the murder.

Though even here, Tim is—in the relevantly same fashion as in the context of the classroom—merely making explicit the consequences of a belief he *has*. In both contexts, Tim is showing that something follows (deductively) from another thing. This is why showing what follows from what is a different kind of activity from the activity of adducing reasons. The latter is an activity of inquiry, the former is one of elucidation. At any rate, unless it can be clearer that Tim's activity is in fact the same activity as that for which RATIONAL SUPPORT is meant as a rational constraint, then it's hard to see why elucidating deductive consequences is supposed to be a problem for RATIONAL SUPPORT⁴⁴.

Subversive basing cases

Regarding Case 4, one might well follow Alvin Goldman (1979) and simply deny Lehrer's intuition that the lawyer is epistemically justified in the belief that the client is innocent. It was, after all, the pull toward thinking that the lawyer *was* justified, combined with the further thought that the only basis on which this justification could plausibly have been attained was the complicated piece of reasoning, that allowed Lehrer to press (*contra* causal theories of the basing relation) that the complicated piece of reasoning counts as the epistemic basis for (and, rather than the faith in the cards, which causally sustains) the lawyer's belief. So, aligning with Goldman and denying that the lawyer is justified allows one to escape what was (*vis-a-vis* RATIONAL SUPPORT) the worrying outcome that the lawyer ever had adduced the complicated line of reasoning as his rational support for believing his client was innocent of the eighth murder.

But going this route does not adequately engage with the case in a satisfying way⁴⁵. In order to more rigorously defend RATIONAL SUPPORT against Case 4, consider again Lehrer's claim that the complicated line of reasoning

⁴⁴If, despite appearances, it turned out that the activity of elucidating the consequences of what one already believes, a priori, falls within the scope of activity that RATIONAL SUPPORT is meant to constrain, then there is still reason to resist this kind of case as counting against RATIONAL SUPPORT. The line here would be to reason along the lines that it is part of the practice of logical inference that we start with what is known or assumed, and via the application of rules, derive further claims. In this context, it's not unreasonable to think that one will always, by default, be more certain of what one has begun with (taken as assumed) than what is inferred, given that there is always the possibility of misapplying the rule.

⁴⁵This is in part why most discussions of this case, when it was construed as a counterexample to causal theories of the basing relation, accepted Lehrer's initial gambit by granting that the lawyer was justified, and then attempted to find fault with the case elsewhere.

is (in the relevant respects) the reason the lawyer is taking in favour of the target belief. Now, the worry was that this much is at tension with RATIONAL SUPPORT because the lawyer is (due to the cards) more certain that the client is innocent than he is in the rational grounds he possesses.

Even with this stage-setting, it's not at all clear that the case should lead us to abandon RATIONAL SUPPORT. Recall again Wright's remark that the practice of reason giving is a practice in which the adducing of a reason for a proposition *p* aims to elicit in one rational conviction that *p* on the basis of the reason. Now, while in the context of the courtroom, the complicated line of reasoning could very well have this effect in the audience, it is not playing this role for the lawyer (whose conviction, recall, is *arational*, due to faith). This observation reveals two important points. Firstly, the audience in the courtroom *can* unobjectionably accept and endorse the complicated line of reasoning as a reason for believing the client is innocent of the eighth murder⁴⁶. The lawyer can *offer* the complicated line of reasoning as a reason for the target belief that is not one that him to rational conviction in the target proposition. But because the complicated line of reasoning does not figure in any rational conviction the lawyer himself has in the innocence of his client, he is *de facto* not actually *taking* the complicated line of reasoning as a reason for his own belief—the most he's done is offer this reason to others. But, then, neither the epistemic situation of the jury nor that of the lawyer stands in conflict with RATIONAL SUPPORT.

§8 Conclusion

We've seen, then, that a Wittgenstenian account of the structure of reasons can be in an important sense self-standing. I've shown that the rational support thesis found in Wittgenstein's epistemology is extractable from his larger picture, and moreover, that it does not entail the more controversial hinge thesis. This was important because the hinge thesis, as we saw, stands in a troubling tension with the independently plausible transmission thesis. But I've shown that the rational support thesis (unlike the hinge thesis) does not incur this problem. Moreover, I've shown that the rational support thesis stands up to four very different kinds of counterexamples that might be leveled against the view. What results is a kind of limited defence of a Wittgenstenian principle of reason-giving, one that doesn't require that we buy in to his wider picture, and which stands on its own legs as a plausible and fully generalisable principle of rational support.

⁴⁶After all, the jury (unafflicted by Tarot convictions) is (a la RATIONAL SUPPORT) in a position to be more certain in the complicated, clever and intelligent line of reasoning the lawyer offers than in the claim they take it as a reason for: the client's innocence.

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