Local and Universal Hinges

Some hinges are culture-linked. They are linked to our localized forms of human life\(^1\) – those forms of life that have resulted from the extension of our instinctive, animal experiencing of the world into an active consideration of it. The term local has both a geographical and a temporal application. It applies to the world-picture of some human beings at a given time. Other hinges are not linked to specific cultures but have constituted the human world-picture, the scaffolding of human thought ‘for unthinkable ages’ (OC 211), and will go on doing so. These hinges are bounds of sense that are internally linked to our concept of a human form of life. If some remote tribe, which has never heard of Armstrong’s giant step, cannot be said to share our local hinge: ‘Man can walk on the moon’, they cannot but share our universal hinge: ‘Most adult men can walk.’ Let us first examine our local hinges.

Local hinges

Some hinges mentioned by Wittgenstein, which I have classified as local hinges are: ‘The existence of Napoleon’, ‘No one was ever on the moon’, ‘The earth is round’, ‘Trains normally arrive in a railway station’ (OC 163, 106, 291, 339). Local hinges constitute the underlying framework of knowledge of some human beings at a given time. They are culture-variant and many of them seem to be the product of empirical observation (e.g. ‘The earth is round’, ‘Trains normally arrive in a railway station’) or epistemic inquiry (e.g. ‘The existence of Napoleon’, ‘No one was ever on the moon’). Their resemblance to empirical or epistemic propositions makes local hinges the best illustration of what Wittgenstein means when he writes that ‘the same proposition [der gleiche Satz] may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing’ (OC 98):

It might be imagined that some propositions [Sätze], of the form of empirical propositions [Erfahrungssätze], were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions [Erfahrungssätze] as were not
hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions \[Sätze\] hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (OC 96)

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC 97)

But if someone were to say ‘So logic too is an empirical science’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition \[der gleiche Satz\] may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (OC 98)

But that a hypothesis can turn into a hinge seems to suggest that hinges \textit{can} be derived from scientific or empirical investigation. Is our certainty then based on knowledge after all? Are we going back to the old epistemic sovereignty? If, as it is maintained throughout \textit{On Certainty}, hinges \textit{underlie} our enquiries, how is it that a hinge can stem from an enquiry? Local hinges are those that most appear to expose the bedrock to threats of empiricism. I now endeavour to dissipate these threats.

\textbf{The transformational metaphor: local hinges as hardened empirical propositions}

The image, used in the first two passages of the riverbed metaphor quoted above, of a (possible) transformation from empirical proposition to hinge and vice versa has led commentators to relate Wittgenstein to Quine, to assume that hinge ‘propositions’ are nothing but empirical propositions that have been accorded a regulative status (cf. section, ‘\textit{Foundational}: hinges do not result from justification’ in Chapter 4). Wittgenstein’s image of the proposition hardening into a rule does not help. He had used it in the \textit{Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics}:

\begin{quote}
It is as if we had hardened the empirical proposition into a rule. And now we have, not an hypothesis that gets tested by experience, but a paradigm with which experience is compared and judged. And so a new kind of judgment. (RFM, p. 324)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
... an empirical proposition hardened into a rule... It is thus withdrawn from being checked by experience, but now serves as a paradigm for judging experience. (RFM, p. 325)
\end{quote}

And it appears again in the first of the riverbed passages:

\begin{quote}
It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (OC 96)
\end{quote}