

# Epistemic Fragments

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This is an attempt to think through the idea that human knowledge has no fundamental ground. It seemed best to present this gesture in fragments rather than argument. In the questioning pursuit of absolute certainty, one ultimately finds the promise of such certainty itself to be what is most questionable and uncertain. With this newfound uncertainty, the ground falls away and an abyss opens up which makes one wonder if and how we know anything at all. What is miraculous is that, despite this epistemic abyss, we nonetheless can and do know—just not in a firmly grounded, absolutely certain way. We rather seem to make recourse to “commonsensical” articles of faith which make understanding possible for us as much as they limit us. Perhaps these brief fragments are ultimately concerned with human knowledge and human finitude, as they are an attempt to humble aspirations toward certain, grounded knowledge in one regard, yet they hopefully gesture toward what may actually be possible for human knowledge in another.

§

At the bottom of every system of knowledge lies not a solid foundation, self-evidently true, but mere articles of faith. “Self-evident truth” is synonymous with “irreducible article of faith.” These articles of faith *ground* some system of knowledge; but, being *groundless*, they also betray the shaky foundations thereof. Upon this realization we may ask: “What grounds the ground of this system of knowledge, if its initial grounds prove to be mere articles of faith without sufficient grounding?” “Why, the ground which grounds the ground!” “But what grounds the ground which grounds the ground?” “The ground which grounds the ground which grounds the ground!” and so on *ad infinitum, ad absurdum*.

§

*The infinite is an abyss* — The infinite regress which “opens up” when one plumbs the depths of the ground of some foundational system of knowledge does indeed leave us with a foundation of a sort: not a firm footing, but an *abyss*—for infinite regress is itself an abyss.

§

*At the foundation of every system of knowledge yawns an abyss.*

## §

How are we to understand this abyss? It would seem foolish to avert our eyes from this disquieting spectacle. Has this newfound nothingness below our feet a positive or negative content? Have we simply led ourselves astray by relying too heavily on a foundationalist metaphor of knowledge, seeking a sufficient ground when there never was one to begin with? Have we stumbled upon a truth? Have we already gone astray? Perhaps the *actual* foundation of things is this abyss ...?

## §

*An abyss emerges because we expected something at bottom which is not, cannot, and never has been there.*

## §

*Absence has presence* — The experience of nothingness itself has positive content when it is felt as an *absence*, an unmet expectation felt as a *lack*. Without any prior expectation, nothingness is *pure* absence, and perhaps goes unfelt, for in this case one does not even know what one is missing.

## §

Fundamental principles or self-evident truths (i.e., irreducible articles of faith, *beliefs*) appear to *ground themselves* by way of a bastardized circular logic (*causa sui*), curiously capable of begetting entire systems of knowledge, working as tacit beliefs about the world which make *action* (including thought) possible for us.<sup>1</sup> This self-causing power of certain beliefs, however, says nothing about their claim to *certainty*, especially as solid foundations for systems of knowledge.

## §

Beliefs are not actively held, but rather subsist passively and unconsciously. Certainty is little more than the *belief* that something is certain. Likewise, the apparent solidity of foundations comes from the belief that such foundations are so. Beliefs themselves are first taken to be certain in some regard. Then, certain beliefs, “solid” to whom they are believed to be certain, become unconsciously, passively accepted by the believer *as* knowledge without further question.

## §

Doubt is thus an unconscious belief loosened from its passive, believed certainty, either by way of

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1. Such tacit beliefs may be called “common sense.”

recalcitrant experiences or other disturbing events which confront said belief by “falsifying” it and bringing it to light as something *questionable*.

§

Though beliefs may cause and uphold themselves, this does not necessarily make them trustworthy or “sufficiently grounded”; in fact, this propensity to self-ground and its unavoidably circular logic is what makes belief most dubious and, in effect, *groundless*—in fact, it marks yet another opening of the abyss, for a firm ground remains out of reach.

§

Can we concede the idea that such “self-evident truths”, these irreducible articles of faith which we find at bottom, conceived *as* beliefs, are self-caused? The idea that foundations are self-caused is no less disquieting than the notion of an abyssal infinite regress, for neither option provides us a *firm footing*. But it appears that one can (almost arbitrarily, though this would risk painting with too broad a stroke) posit any belief in some system of knowledge as being self-caused, as upholding itself, merely by *asserting* it and thus, in a crude manner, *making it so*. Yet this only seems to work so long as we do not bring the belief’s *sufficient grounding* into question, burying our heads in the sand and asserting dogmatically what we have no right to claim. Here, finding *causa sui* itself suspicious and insufficient for our task at hand, we are thus left with our abyssal ground as before without getting any closer to its meaning.

§

We may attempt to “cross” this abyss by *positing* first principles, by *consciously* believing in some fundamental, irreducible articles of faith upon which we may plant our feet. However, this active attempt to find one’s footing by way of belief is troubled by the fact that one loses one’s footing when discovering the groundlessness of belief as such, especially the groundlessness of those beliefs which lie as some foundation. Every belief has the capacity to “cause” itself, yet this does not give it any sufficient grounding. The stubborn assertion of some belief only stubbornly asserts some belief; questions regarding the belief’s truth, certainty, and the like remain unaltered therein.

§

Once the abyss yawns, a stubborn assertion of belief will not sufficiently cover it, for it is due to the

very fact that the foundation is composed of groundless beliefs which opened the abyss from the start! And is there such a thing as a *sufficiently grounded belief*...?

§

We appear to remain ensnared in the nothingness which emerged at the outset. Yet, as Hume says, “An absurd consequence, if necessary, proves the original doctrine to be absurd”—with this yawning abyss we have arrived at an absurd consequence, for an abyss is almost inconceivable (*horror vacui*), regardless of its truth or illusoriness; but from what original doctrine did it emerge?<sup>2</sup>

§

The *need for* and the very *possibility of* something like “sufficient grounding” as a foundation should be scrutinized, for we have hitherto assumed the notion “sufficient grounding” as self-evident and necessary for knowledge without bringing out what is *questionable* in it.

§

Implicit in the notion “sufficient grounding” is a need for fixity—the belief in a belief’s certainty, (or at least a belief in the possibility of such certain beliefs which we *can* ground and fix ourselves). The emergent nothingness with which we are dealing is a consequence of the absence of such sufficient grounding, or rather the *illusoriness* of fixity

§

*Abandonment of the need for fixity*—Foundations, grounds, Being, and the like are attempts to escape the uncertainty and precariousness of the ceaseless flux of existence, to *fix* ourselves where we are in fact without stable ground. Perhaps the abyss which yawns at the bottom of foundational systems of knowledge shows us the nothingness of this fixity sought. For, despite the extreme consequence of this abyss, the world still exists and we are still in it, feeling, breathing, living; rather than reality itself being abyssal, the abstract inventions of fixity show themselves to be without reality, at bottom abyssal. To take the former as the conclusion would be to (wrongly) prioritize epistemology as accounting for all of existence, and to thus assume that epistemology’s conclusions must directly speak to existence *in toto*, rather than only of epistemology itself.

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2. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett), 67

## §

Faith is an attempt to attain fixity, but the abyss which emerges from this attempt shows the limits and insufficiency of such attempts to attain fixity. While faith may be expedient, insofar as such attempts help make inquiry and action possible, there remains something chimerical about such “grounding” principles insofar as any *actual* fixity remains out of reach.

## §

Founding principles, irreducible articles of faith, thus work as *heuristic devices* (rather than certain, self-evident axioms) which help us to “know” and act in the world, and which are arrived at and posited *post hoc* rather than the discovered at bottom or thought *a priori*.

## §

Of course, these very fragments are predicated upon implicit, groundless beliefs. We are unable to fully uncover the operative beliefs at work here, even if we attempt to enumerate them, for the very process of enumeration involves further groundless, irreducible articles of faith which remain implicit and undisclosed *in order to enumerate*—we *need* them to proceed in any mode of discourse, action, or thought.

## §

Further, such beliefs are born through our precarious experiences in the world. Thus, as heuristic devices, they help us more readily think and act without having to derive fundamental principles at every waking moment. However, precarious experience is not so much a *ground* for these beliefs as it is the ever-flowing canal from which they originate, itself always already becoming, approaching us and streaming past us, capable of knocking us off our feet at any moment

## §

Irreducible articles of faith are not reducible to further grounding articles of faith, but are enmeshed in a web of other irreducible articles of faith. When some come to light, others remain hidden in the background. Such faith produces commonsensical knowledge, which is as necessary as it is groundless.

## §

We are ultimately beholden to our self-evident truths, our irreducible articles of faith, our beliefs,

our illusions, our myths, our knowledge, our fundamental principles, our axioms, our theories, our customs, our hopes ... We are beholden to them insofar as they make the conditions of life both possible and endurable for us; we are prey to them insofar as, on a whim, they may mislead us, disappoint us, break us.

§

*We have only the dubious certainty of our feet.*