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In an earlier paper\(^1\) I argued that for much of philosophy’s history, the model of certainty provided by mathematics has provided a seductive but, ultimately, baleful paradigm of what philosophy should strive for. The employment of the mathematical model of certainty leads inevitably to failure and, consequent upon that, to scepticism, whether in the classical mode, or in the post-modern style of Rorty and others. Where, then, does that leave us? If, as I argued, certainty of a mathematical kind is unattainable and the scepticism that results from despair at the unattainability of such certainty is ultimately self-stultifying, from what starting point, if any, can we begin our philosophical inquiries? My conclusion was that the ineliminable starting point of every inquiry could not but be the very act of inquiry itself. Furthermore, the conditions of the act of enquiry and whatever follows ineluctably from the act of inquiry cannot, without performative contradiction, be gainsaid.

The suspicion may arise that if we proceed in this way we are simply providing a variation on the strategy of the Cartesian \textit{cogito}. Perhaps so, but there is a difference. For both Aristotle and Descartes their respective starting points gave them a firm point of departure; for both, the rejection of this point of departure involved the rejecter in a performative contradiction. The difference between their respective positions was that while Descartes’ \textit{cogito} represented a retreat to subjectivity, from which position escape seems impossible, Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction, involving as it does a commitment to language and communication, was implicitly
social. The Cartesian cogito leads to the solipsistic self but the act of inquiry, which is impossible without language, leads not to a single individual but to a whole community of language users. Language is the repository of our common ‘intentions’ and is the property of the entire speech community, not the idiosyncratic plaything of individual speakers.²

I concluded the earlier paper by stating that the task for a contemporary metaphysics is, firstly, to avoid the lures of an unattainable certainty and the blandishments of scepticism (under whatever name it may currently be masquerading) and, secondly, to resist a surrender of its territory to philosophical naturalism by the recovery of a confidence in the power of the human mind to ask and to answer questions about the nature, meaning and value of all that exists. Having dismissed mathematical certainty as an inappropriate model for the purposes of philosophical inquiry and rejected scepticism as self-stultifying, I should like to make a small contribution to the task of metaphysics by exploring an account of certainty that may help us to steer a path between the inappropriate and the undesirable.

In his two published works, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the Philosophical Investigations, and in the many volumes of his writings published posthumously, Wittgenstein evinced no great interest in matters epistemological. However, between his resignation of the chair of philosophy at Cambridge in 1945 and his death six years later, Wittgenstein began a new phase of work that, while partly continuing some of the themes in the Investigations, nevertheless explored new ground. This work, posthumously published as On Certainty, has, I believe, a higher


2 Wittgenstein remarks, and we might consider this remark directed towards Descartes: “If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.” [On Certainty (Oxford 1969), 114, hereinafter OC] Similarly anti-Cartesian is the remark that “The argument ‘I may be
status that the bulk of the material produced by but not published by Wittgenstein himself: it is consistent, thematically unified and, significantly, it is not preparatory or discarded material for his two published works. Wittgenstein was spurred into a consideration of epistemological issues by reflecting on two articles of G.E. Moore; “In Defence of Common Sense” and “A Proof of the External World”.  

Broadly speaking, in traditional epistemology there are two principal approaches to questions of justification; either one is a foundationalist (holding that each element in an epistemic structure is supported ultimately by some element which is itself foundational yet unsupported by any other proposition, and which is possessed of some special characteristic, such as that of being self-evident, which fits it for that role) or one is a coherentist (holding that the elements in an epistemic structure are supported by a network of surrounding elements without its being the case that any of these surrounding elements are necessarily foundational). Wittgenstein is neither a foundationalist nor a coherentist or perhaps he is both, but in a distinctively individual way.

Some of his remarks might seem to put him into the foundationalist camp, e.g. “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded” (OC 253) but other remarks are difficult to reconcile with a foundationalist position, e.g. “The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing” (OC 166) and “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false.” (OC 205). This last remark could not be accepted by a foundationalist because the ultimate elements that ground all others in an epistemic structure are, for a foundationalist, by their very nature, most worthy of belief; that is, they are axioms.

dreaming’ is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well-and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning.” [OC 383]

3 Both papers are available in G. E. Moore, Philosophical Papers (London, 1959).
Is Wittgenstein then a coherentist? Several remarks seem to suggest just this interpretation. For example: “When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)” (OC 141) and “It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support.” (OC 142) But then, how do we account for the reference to foundations in propositions such as “[I]n the entire system of our language-games it [namely the belief that the earth has existed for many years] belongs to the foundations.” (OC 411)

What is common to both foundationalist and coherentist is that their systems are purely epistemic, that is, they are both concerned with the ordering and possibility of justifying sets of propositions. For Wittgenstein, however, belief, and the expression of belief in propositions, is as much a matter of the natural history of man as is his physical constitution. Specifically, Wittgenstein holds that belief cannot be radically divorced from praxis. “As if the giving of grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition; it is an ungrounded way of acting” (OC 110), and “Giving grounds, however justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.” (OC 204) This marriage of language and praxis is central to the thought of the mature Wittgenstein.

I claimed in my earlier paper that the fact of enquiry, together with its conditions and its necessary consequences could provide us with a non-gainsayable starting point for our metaphysical endeavours. Wittgenstein last thoughts open up for us the possibility of grasping how the restriction of the discussion of certainty to a purely epistemic context is inherently limited and thus provide a point of entry for adherents
to an anglo-phone tradition in philosophy who find it difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate the enduring value of the classical tradition.

By linking language and praxis in this way, Wittgenstein naturalises epistemology. Our beliefs, our opinions, our certainties are not the epistemic possessions of disembodied spirits but aspects of the activity of essentially embodied creatures. Again, a quote from Wittgenstein, though not originally directed towards this situation, is illuminating. “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. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.” (OC 475)

The development of each individual human being is a microcosm of the social. As children, we move from functioning originally more or less purely on the stimulus-response level, to a situation in which the characteristically human capacity to ask and answer questions begins to emerge. When a child begins to interact verbally with its mother, on the child’s side we are dealing first with random noises and then, very quickly, with at most a rudimentary kind of signalling that, considered just as such, is not different in kind from animal communication. On the mother’s side, however, the child’s actions, movements, sounds, noises, are all interpreted as being the actions of a communicative human being. To use the language of Walker Percy, the distinguished American novelist, physician and philosopher, the child’s initial verbal activity is dyadic yet it is interpreted triadically. As Wittgenstein puts it: “The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.” (OC 538) This socially
interactive yet pre-semantic (on the child’s side) situation is the vital context within which genuine language use will begin, including the characteristically human activity of asking and answering questions. That context of social interaction, however, is not merely a starting point to be left behind as the child matures; it is the continuing environment, the ground that keeps our language rooted to reality, however recondite and sophisticated our knowledge may become.

Furthermore, and this is where we return to the discussion of certainty, it is in this context, in this inherited background, that certainty resides. “…I want to conceive [certainty] as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.” (OC 359 Emphasis added) For Wittgenstein, certainty is not a characteristic that attaches to propositions just as such, but rather to the background context without which propositions could not even be enunciated. This background context is a sort of transcendental condition of there being meaningful propositions at all.

The advantages of such an approach to epistemology are that it permits a non-foundational, functional yet dynamic kind of certainty; in being ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ it can command a hearing in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy while appropriating and re-expressing what is valuable in more classical traditions.

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5 When the child becomes minimally linguistically competent, what it first grasps of the function of the interrogative pronouns is their capacity to elicit a response. This discovery can drive adults mad. It takes a further process of socialisation before the child understands that all questions carry with them an horizon of meaning.

6 See, for example, Bernard Lonergan’s analysis of the structure of cognition in *Insight* (London, 1957).