Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty

NIGEL PLEASANTS

University of Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT   *Alice Crary claims that "the standard view of the bearing of Wittgenstein's philosophy on ethics" is dominated by "inviolability interpretations", which often underlie conservative readings of Wittgenstein. Crary says that such interpretations are "especially marked in connection with* On Certainty*", where Wittgenstein is represented as holding that "our linguistic practices are immune to rational criticism, or inviolable". Crary's own conception of the bearing of Wittgenstein's philosophy on ethics, which I call the "intrinsically-ethical reading", derives from the influential New Wittgenstein school of exegesis, and is also espoused by James Edwards, Cora Diamond, and Stephen Mulhall. To my eyes, intrinsically-ethical readings present a peculiar picture of ethics, which I endeavour to expose in Part I of the paper. In Part II I present a reading of* On Certainty *that Crary would call an "inviolability interpretation", defend it against New Wittgensteinian critiques, and show that this kind of reading has nothing to do with ethical or political conservatism. I go on to show how Wittgenstein's observations on the manner in which we can neither question nor affirm certain states of affairs that are fundamental to our epistemic practices can be fruitfully extended to ethics. Doing so sheds light on the phenomenon that I call "basic moral certainty", which constitutes the foundation of our ethical practices, and the scaffolding or framework of moral perception, inquiry, and judgement. The nature and significance of basic moral certainty will be illustrated through consideration of the strangeness of philosophers' attempts at explaining the wrongness of killing.*

> …Wittgenstein said it was strange that you could find books on ethics in which there was no mention of a genuine ethical or moral problem.
> (Rhees 1965, p. 21)

Correspondence Address: Nigel Pleasants, Department of Sociology & Philosophy, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK. Email: n.j.pleasants@ex.ac.uk

In recent papers on the implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy for politics (2000b) and ethics (2005), Alice Crary opines that "the standard view of the bearing of Wittgenstein's philosophy on ethics" is dominated by "inviolability interpretations" of "Wittgenstein's later view of meaning" (2005, pp. 276–7). The common theme of such interpretations, according to Crary, is that the use of language in everyday practice ("language-games") constitutes its meaning, such that settled practice determines what can and cannot legitimately be said (or thought, or done), thereby setting "the bounds of sense" (ibid, p. 277). Inviolability interpretations are "especially marked in connection with *On Certainty*", where Wittgenstein supposedly is typically read as asserting that "our own (and perhaps also others') linguistic practices" (or just "our own practices")[1] are "immune to rational scrutiny" (ibid, 279–80). There is, then, an elective affinity with "ethical *conservatism*" and "conservative political thought": "most commentary on Wittgenstein's philosophy which represents it as having a conservative bent draws on versions of inviolability interpretations" (Crary 2005, p. 278; 2000b, p. 121).

Crary aims to demonstrate the untenability of inviolability interpretations and thereby to undermine the ground on which conservative readings of Wittgenstein stand. In place of inviolability interpretations she proffers "a more faithful interpretation" of "Wittgenstein's later view of meaning" (Crary 2005, p. 276), which issues from the influential New Wittgenstein school of exegesis (Crary & Read 2000). Crary's conception of the ethical significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy, which I call (for reasons that will become obvious) an "intrinsically-ethical reading", is derived from this New Wittgensteinian interpretation of Wittgenstein's views on meaning and "the limits of sense" (Crary 2005, p. 286). Notwithstanding Crary's claim that "inviolability interpretations are the common denominator of most discussions about Wittgenstein and ethics" (ibid, p. 278), intrinsically-ethical readings have achieved considerable prominence in recent years. Other leading proponents include James Edwards (1982), Cora Diamond (2000), and Stephen Mulhall (2002).

To my eyes, intrinsically-ethical readings present a peculiar picture of ethical perception, thought, and judgement, and their objects. In Part I, below, I exhibit and explore its peculiarity. Although intrinsically-ethical readings present a picture of ethics that is at odds with that proffered by conservative readings of Wittgenstein, the respective readings have the same interpretative outlook in that they claim to descry a normative vision in the substance of what Wittgenstein says on language, meaning, and everyday practice. My way of reading Wittgenstein in relation to ethics is quite the opposite. I see no distinctively moral viewpoint or ethical qualities in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. But I do think that the later philosophy, especially that of *On Certainty*, can be of help in our thinking about ethics and ethical issues. I doubt that I would want to endorse all that Crary

collects under the banner of inviolability interpretations, but I do defend what she would call an "inviolability interpretation" of *On Certainty*. In Part II of this essay I present such a reading, defend it against the New Wittgenstein critique, and show that it has nothing to do with ethical or political conservatism. I then go on to argue that Wittgenstein's unique "foundationalism" (Stroll 2005) in *On Certainty* can fruitfully be extended to ethics, bringing to attention the phenomenon that I call "basic moral certainty". The phenomenon will be depicted, and its significance illustrated, through consideration of the strangeness of philosophers' attempts at explaining the wrongness of killing.

I. Intrinsically-ethical readings of Wittgenstein

Intrinsically-ethical readings of Wittgenstein are closely associated with the New Wittgenstein school of exegesis. The core principle of this school is that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is much closer to his early philosophy (which expressed striking claims on the nature of ethics), and vice versa, than is recognised in most "standard interpretations" (Crary 2000a, p. 1). In both its early and later phases, his philosophy is held to be "unified in its fundamental aim, in its characteristic modes of criticism, and even, to some degree, in its methods" (ibid., p. 13).This attribution of unity finds expression in four core themes:

1. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is to be read *therapeutically*, not *propositionally*, in order that the philosopher might come to recognise her propensity to mistake nonsense for philosophical insight. It is to be read *imaginatively*, such that "self-understanding" is achieved "through the reader's imaginative activity" (Diamond 2000, p. 164).
2. The early, as well as the later, philosophy is to be read *non-metaphysically*. The view of language-world relations proffered in the *Tractatus* seems to be advanced metaphysically, from a transcendental standpoint, but New Wittgensteinians reject this received interpretive stance, insisting that when Wittgenstein (1988, 6.54) states that his own propositions (on the essential nature of language and the world) be recognised "as nonsensical", he means just that. They also contend that standard interpretations, according to which Wittgenstein's later philosophy relinquishes Tractarian transcendentalism for non-metaphysical, non-essential-ist descriptions of language grounded in social practice, remain in thrall to metaphysical illusions. The aspiration for a vantage point—*any* vantage point, including one supposedly grounded in everyday practice—from which to attain a view of "language" or "the world" as such, or "the relation" between them, results in

3. *Nonsense* continues to be the operative "term of philosophical criticism" (Crary 2000b, p. 128) in the later, as in the early, philosophy. For both early and later Wittgenstein, there is only "mere nonsense", which is "the only kind of nonsense there is" (Conant 2000, p. 176–7). Nonsense is the absolute absence of sense, "mere gibberish", it is "simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought" (Conant 2000, p. 176–7). Thus a Tractarian proposition on "the essence of the world" (1988, 3.3421), and a G. E. Moore proposition on what Moore "*knows*" to be the case (to be examined below) are equally nonsensical—they express no thought at all.

4. The later philosophy perpetuates the Tractarian doctrine of ethical non-propositionality and ineffability ("it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics"; "ethics cannot be put into words" [1988, 6.42, 6.421]).

After his middle-period "Lecture on ethics" (1965 [1930]), in which he expounded on the Tractarian doctrine of ethical ineffability, Wittgenstein did not address ethics or ethical topics in his subsequent philosophical writings. Nevertheless, Crary, and other New Wittgensteinians, maintain that Wittgenstein's Tractarian attitude to ethics endured throughout all his writings. They present this *transcendentalist* doctrine as one of ethical *immanence*, which is meant not as a new doctrine, but as an elucidation of "ethical ineffability". Rather than characterising ethics as something "higher" (as did Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* [6.42]), they say that for Wittgenstein ethics, or "the ethical" (Crary 2005; Diamond 2000), is *omni-pervasive*. Thus Crary claims that Wittgenstein "invites us" to "think of the ethical as a dimension of *all* our modes of thought and talk" (2005, p. 275); Mulhall suggests that Wittgenstein "conceived of ethics […] as a pervasive dimension of life rather than a distinguishable region or strand of it" (2002); and Diamond commends what she takes to be Wittgenstein's picture of "ethics tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole, life" (2000, p. 153).

This conception of the immanence of "the ethical" is supposedly a self-consciously integral feature of Wittgenstein's own philosophical writing, which is imbued with ethical significance even when (seemingly, to the unwary reader) not directed at ethical issues. *All* of Wittgenstein's writings constitute a profound exemplification of, and stimulus to, ethical under-standing (Crary 2005, pp. 295–6). So, coming to appreciate Wittgenstein's exposure of "philosophical confusions about the workings of language" is not "a merely intellectual enterprise", but rather "an ethical enterprise" (ibid., p. 295); "any and every Wittgensteinian philosophical exercise will place rigorous ethical demands upon its practitioners" (Mulhall 2002,

p. 319). Ethical understanding involves recognition and acceptance of ''our responsibility for what we say and think'' (Crary 2005, p. 296); a ''Wittgensteinian vision of language use'' has ''a pervasive moral dimension—an ethical or spiritual aspect'' (Mulhall 2002, p. 315). According to intrinsically-ethical readings then, it is not that Wittgenstein's philosophy has *implications for* ethics, but that it is, in itself, *already* ''an intrinsically ethical endeavour'' (Crary 2005, p. 300n40). Similarly, Edwards (1982, p. 237) maintains that ''Wittgenstein's notion of the sound human understanding [is] an *ethical* vision'', and Mulhall (2002, p. 320) talks of ''Wittgenstein's philosophical methods as having a pervasive ethical or spiritual dimension''.

The fact that Wittgenstein wrote nothing on ethics in his later work clearly is consistent with his continuing to believe that ''ethics cannot be put into words''. But the more economical interpretation that I favour is simply that by the time of his later philosophy he no longer held the doctrine of ethical ineffability and had nothing to say, philosophically, on ethical topics. In a number of ways that I shall now canvass, I find intrinsically-ethical readings discordant with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and more importantly, I find their depiction of ethical phenomena and ethical concerns most peculiar.

i. Aestheticisation of ethics

Intrinsically-ethical readers' allusive and elusive insistence on the immanence of ''the ethical'' carries forth the contemplative, reverential attitude towards ethics that Wittgenstein propounded in ''Lecture on ethics''. Wittgenstein spoke there of a ''characteristic misuse of our language [that] runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions'' (1965, p. 9). What he meant by this is that when we utter or entertain (seemingly) ethical propositions such as ''X is (morally) right'', or ''X has (intrinsic) value'', we think we know what we mean thereby, but in fact the evaluative content of the proposition does not, and cannot, go beyond simile and allegory. This is because we conflate ''two very different senses'' of value, namely, ''the trivial or relative'' and ''the ethical or absolute'' (ibid., p. 5). Only the trivial/relative sense of value can be spoken of sensefully, as in statements such as ''this is the right way to Granchester'' (assuming that you want to go the quickest way, or the easiest, safest, etc.). Statements that seem to convey a distinctively *ethical* sense of ''right'' or ''good'' (i.e. that which is unconditionally and unqualifiedly right or good in and of itself[2]) are merely analogical extensions of the *relative* sense of those values. It is only because we mistake statements of relative value for *ethical* value that we think we can speak sensefully of the latter.

In spite of ethical propositions ''seem[ing] to be mere nonsense'' (ibid., p. 10), Wittgenstein acknowledged the tendency, even in his own case, to

speak or think in just such terms. "[I]t always happens", he said, "that the idea of one particular experience presents itself" when he pondered the nature of ethical value: "*I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist' " (ibid., p. 8). I recognise the experience that Wittgenstein reported in his lecture, and yet it seems to me not to be an experience of *ethical* value. Nothing of *ethical* import attaches to this experience or thought; no imperatives for action issue from it. If certain modes of respectful and non-exploitative action towards "the world" qua natural world were commended on the basis of the experience, it would then be an experience or thought concerning ethical value. But Wittgenstein's attitude to the experience is purely contemplative, and therefore it is, I think, more appropriately described as an *aesthetic* experience (of "the sublime", as Kant would call it), not an *ethical* experience.

In line with this "aestheticisation" of ethics, Crary and Mulhall maintain that coming to terms with Wittgenstein's philosophy (early and late) is not "a merely intellectual enterprise", but rather an *ethical* or *spiritual* quest. I take the opposite view. To me, reading, and thinking with, Wittgenstein *is* an intellectual, non-moral, undertaking. It is, I readily agree, a good thing to improve one's ability to think, and to work at achieving clarity of thought. And reading Wittgenstein can, I believe, help one pursue these goals, so it is good to read him. But in what sense are these goals themselves good? I would say they are good in Wittgenstein's (Lecture on ethics) "relative/ trivial" sense, not good in the sense of *ethically* good. The goodness of a clear philosophical thinker is good in the way that Wittgenstein's example of "a good pianist" is good. The goodness of the latter consists in being able to "play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity" (ibid., p. 5). Such goodness, therefore, depends on the value of music and musical proficiency. Similarly, the goodness of a clear, precise, reflective philosopher, who has mastery of language and uses it economically, proficiently, and perspicuously, depends on the value that is accorded to such intellectual prowess. But I don't think that we should say that either the good pianist or the good (Wittgensteinian) philosopher is *ethically* good just in virtue of those particular skills, abilities and dispositions. Such people may be impressive, and may lead more enriched lives as a consequence of having these abilities. But I do not believe that learning what Wittgenstein has to teach or show in his philosophical writings of itself has the capacity to sharpen people's sensitivity to *ethical* salience and significance.

I find that proponents of the idea that Wittgenstein "urges us to conceive" of his philosophy as pre-eminently "an ethical enterprise" (Crary 2005, p. 295) are very vague about how, and in which ways, it is supposed to be so. Crary attempts to explicate the idea by citing some of Wittgenstein's pronouncements on practicing philosophy. She claims that "what he saw as

the ethical demands of philosophizing" is evident in his enjoinder to students "to go 'the bloody hard way in philosophy' ", and that "philosophy calls for 'a kind of work on oneself' ", which "involves a peculiarly ethical type of 'difficulty, having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect' " (ibid., pp. 301n40, 295). Crary's adjectival use of "ethical" to characterise the modality of Wittgenstein's remarks is her own gloss. But I cannot see anything of *ethical* significance in the notion that one should take "the bloody hard way" in philosophy, or that it requires working on oneself, or that it involves difficulty in the exercise of the will more than it does the intellect. Nor do these remarks strike me as especially profound—they could have been uttered by *any* philosophy teacher, and probably pertain equally pertinently to any humanities or science discipline.

The notion that reading and understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy is an ethical or spiritual quest seems to be connected with the New Wittgenstein interpretive principle of reading both the early and later works "therapeutically" and "imaginatively". Thus Diamond contends that Wittgenstein's philosophy consists in "remarks aimed at bringing about a kind of self-understanding through the reader's imaginative activity". And this stands in contrast to "the false imagination of philosophy" (Diamond 2000, p. 164), that is, non-(New)-Wittgensteinian philosophy, of course. Diamond also suggests that communion with "the character of the ethical" can be sought through entering imaginatively into the worlds and characters created by literary works. Wittgenstein himself was a keen advocate to friends of the edificatory potential of certain literary works, and many subsequent Wittgensteinian moral philosophers have embraced this medium in their writings. The idea that literature—and other artistic-cultural products, including philosophy—exercises morally sensitising effects is a widely and deeply held liberal-humanist assumption. But it has been called into question by the renowned literary critic George Steiner.

Steiner contends that "we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilise moral perception [and] what is worse—a certain body of evidence points the other way" (1967, p. 81). He is referring to the astoundingly oxymoronic mix of civility, culture and barbarity that characterised so many of the architects, administrators, and directors of the Nazi concentration and death camps. "There is", Steiner says, "something rather terrible in our doubt whether the study and delight a man takes in Shakespeare makes him any less capable of organizing a concentration camp" *(*ibid., p. 86). Following this thought, I would ask: What reason or evidence is there for thinking that the study, and even understanding, of *Philosophical Investigations* might have made concentration and death camp managers and supervisors any less capable of doing what they did? And what reason or evidence is there for thinking that such study and understanding might fortify *us* against participation in wrong or evil-doing? It might be objected that of course it is all too easy to read

Wittgenstein superficially and badly, projecting onto his writings one's own preconceptions, preoccupations and prejudices. My response to this echoes Steiner when he says that the suggestion that those Holocaust perpetrators who had "knowledge of Goethe" and took "delight in the poetry of Rilke" evidently did not read them *properly*, "is an evasion": they "may have been reading [them] very well indeed" (ibid.). What, exactly, is imbibed by those that read Wittgenstein well—even *very* well—that is supposed to act as prophylactic against moral insensitivity, myopia, and blindness?

ii. Mystification of ethics

Intrinsically-ethical readings mystify the concept of ethics and our ability knowledgeably to apply ethical words and to recognise contexts calling for specifically ethical thought or judgement. This mystification is reminiscent of the philosophical sublimation of meaning that Wittgenstein labours to expose in his later philosophy. Just as the traditional philosopher fixates on what he takes to be *the nature of meaning* as such, and *the meaning* of words in isolation from their *use*, so intrinsically-ethical readers strive to divine "the character of the ethical" (Diamond 2000, p. 169). The word "ethical" is thereby given the grammatical role of a substantive, whereas in actual ethical discourse it is invariably used adjectivally. Wittgenstein diagnoses such ways of thinking and speaking as "one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment", wherein "a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it" (1972, p. 1). By way of remedy, Wittgenstein recommends bringing questions like "what is meaning?" "down to earth". Then, he suggests, once you have reminded yourself of how the word "meaning" (or "ethical") is used in normal contexts, you might be cured of "the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call " 'the meaning' " (ibid.; cf. 1968, §560)—or "the ethical".

I am quite sure that most people have no sense of an immanent ethical quality permeating all of their thoughts, use of language, and "everything there is or can be".[3] I think most people would be perplexed by the idea of ethics being "tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole". Speaking for myself, I have great difficulty understanding this numinous proposition. It is hard enough to know what *is* right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, etc., but if we also have to intuit what "the ethical" *is* or *means* (beyond how ethical words are used in the language-games in which they feature), our difficulty is compounded. Intrinsically-ethical readings seem to me to construct an aura of mystery which, if taken seriously, might divert attention from the important ethical questions and problems. Of course, there is much uncertainty, unclarity and contention over what *is* (which acts, practices, and institutions are) right, wrong, permissible, etc.

But this concerns the *object* of rightness, etc., not what *rightness*, etc. ("the ethical") is *per se*.

iii. Linguistification of ethics

According to intrinsically-ethical readings, Wittgenstein's philosophy aims to stimulate us into acknowledgement and acceptance of "our responsibility for what we say and think" (Crary 2005, p. 295), to counter our tendency for "sloughing off that responsibility onto others or onto the words themselves" (Mulhall 2002, p. 315). This view of linguistic-moral responsibility is based on the idea that "our use of words [is] everywhere informed by...a kind of normativity", therefore *all* use of language has "a pervasive moral dimension" (ibid.), and "ethics [is] concerned with a dimension of all of discourse" (Crary 2005, p. 294). This is a hyperbolic *moralisation* (in the negative, pontificatory sense) of everyday life that could not be taken literally. The normativity involved in most uses of words in most contexts is very different from that in which actions are assessed for their *moral* significance (where someone/thing can be harmed or benefited by someone's actions). So, for example, disputes over whether, or under which conditions, it is permissible to break the grammatical rule against splitting the infinitive are decisively different from disputes over whether, or under which conditions, abortion is permissible. As well as presenting a peculiar view of what ethics is about, intrinsically-ethical readings disregard Wittgenstein's meta-philosophical injunction in his later writing that "we may not advance any kind of theory", and that "[w]e must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place" (1968, §109). For the claim that "the ethical" permeates language, thought and "everything there is or can be", and that coming to understand Wittgenstein's philosophy is "an intrinsically ethical endeavour", is clearly a *theory*-generated view, not one arrived at through description of our actual discursive and judgemental practices.

   On Crary's and other intrinsically-ethical readers' conception of Wittgenstein's philosophy, its import for ethics is internal to the content of that philosophy, which is taken to inhere in his "view of meaning" and "the limits of sense". By contrast, I see the import of Wittgenstein's (later) philosophy as being *externally* related to ethics. In terms of the dichotomy propounded by Crary and Diamond—the traditional picture of ethics conceived as "a sphere of discourse among others", versus the intrinsically-ethical picture of "ethics tied to everything there is or can be" (Diamond 2000, p. 153; Crary 2005, p. 294)—I would say that Wittgenstein's later attitude is more conducive to the traditional picture. Or as I would rather put it, ethical discourse is best conceived of as an extended family of language-games with ethical terms *via which* we address matters of moral concern (make judgements about the rightness or permissibility of certain

acts, practices and institutions, and argue about which kinds of thing have moral value and to which extent). In line with this attitude, I turn now to an examination of basic moral certainty. I begin with an outline of my reading of the central problems and puzzles with which Wittgenstein is preoccupied in *On Certainty*.

II. Basic moral certainty

Wittgenstein's reflections in *On Certainty* are motivated by Moore's claim to *know*, incorrigibly, the truth of propositions in which he stated some very basic empirical facts. Most famously, Moore insisted that he *knew* that his hands existed, at least at the time at which he displayed them either to an audience or to himself, whilst asserting "Here is one hand, and here is another" (1959, p. 146). Although pronounced in the first person, Moore insists that "we all know, with certainty, many such propositions to be true" (ibid., p. 53). Wittgenstein counters that what is asserted in such a performance is not *known* by the asserter: "Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows" (1979, §151). This is because Moore cannot say *how* he came to know what he asserts he knows, nor offer any reasons or evidence for his knowledge-claims. He can only insist, pertinaciously, with what Wittgenstein calls "a metaphysical emphasis" (ibid., §482), that he *does know* it.[4] Moore's assertions look like empirical knowledge-claims, but they cannot actually be treated as propositional knowledge: "not everything in the *form* of an empirical proposition *is* one" (ibid., §308). What Moore asserts is neither empirical, nor any other kind of, knowledge. It is indubitably certain that the states of affairs invoked in his assertions pertain, although the propositions in which they are asserted are neither analytically nor necessarily true. What the assertions invoke are not states of affairs that are or can be known to be the case, but states of affairs that no-one could doubt or question, and which no-one (apart from a philosopher trying to prove a philosophical thesis the negation of which cannot be taken seriously) would ever think of putting into propositional form. These states of affairs are the objects of what I call, following Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2005, p. 78), "basic certainty" .

 Speech-acts by which the asserter strives to claim propositional knowledge of the objects of basic certainty strike us as bizarre and alien (as do various other examples of radical comic or artistic performance), and we do not quite know what to make of them. This bizarreness comes not from the *content* of what is asserted—which is unremarkably true after all[5]—but from encountering basic certainty transmogrified into propositional form. When we shake hands with someone we act with the unquestioning certainty that there is no danger of that person's hand detaching from their arm, and the very idea that this might happen is grotesquely amusing—even though such an event is by no means *impossible*. On what basis do we so act? Obviously,

we have direct acquaintance with hand-to-arm solidity in our own case, and observational experience of it in many other people with whom we have shaken hands in the past. But if asked how we know, or why we believe, that hands are robustly attached to arms, would we proffer this experience as the justification or ground of, or evidence or explanation for, our confidence? Surely not; the appropriate, and truthful, reply would be something like: "I've never thought about it; it has never occurred to me to think about it; that's just something we take for granted without ever having been told or learned that it is so". It is a misuse of the concepts "to know" or "to believe" to use them in this context. This is not because the robustness of hand-to-arm connection is "practical" knowledge ("know-how", "tacit knowledge", "implicit knowledge") rather than propositional knowledge. It isn't *any* kind of knowledge, or belief.

The bottom line is that what underlies our epistemic practices and capacities is not itself an epistemic practice or capacity, nor items of certain knowledge, but something of a quite different kind, namely, our fundamental ways of being and acting in the world. So the things stated in the expression of basic certainties are not things that we can say, or think, we *know*; but *that* these things are incorrigibly certain for us is *shown* in what we do and how we do it: "I shew this knowledge day in, day out by my actions and in what I say"; "my life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on" (Wittgenstein, 1979, §431, §7).[6] The objects of basic certainty that Wittgenstein discusses are such that we don't even realise that we are certain about them unless or until it is brought to our attention: "I do not explicitly learn the propositions [basic certainties—NP] that stand fast for me", though "I can *discover* them subsequently" (ibid., §152). We discover them by having them pointed out to us (e.g. by Wittgenstein), then finding it impossible genuinely to affirm, doubt or question them, and through experiencing the bizarreness of their display in propositional form.

i. The New Wittgenstein reading of On Certainty

The foregoing is an example of the kind of reading of *On Certainty* that Crary calls an "inviolability interpretation". She would consider it fatally flawed due to a failure to comprehend Wittgenstein's attitude towards what I have referred to as propositions expressing basic certainty. Wittgenstein's use of the German word "*Satz*" in *On Certainty* is usually translated as "proposition". However, Crary notes that "*Satz*" also means "sentence", and sentences, she insists, are a very different kind of thing to propositions. Propositions are "entities that are as such in the business of expressing thoughts", whereas sentences are "merely grammatical entities" (Crary 2005, p. 281). According to this categorisation, someone could enunciate a *Satz* that is grammatically in order yet fail to express any thought by it, in

which case that *Satz* would be a legitimate sentence, but not a proposition. This possibility is realised, Crary contends, in the case of *Sätze* such as Moore's that I have described as expressions of basic certainty. The *Satz* ''Here is a hand'', uttered with the purported aim of convincing the hearer that one incorrigibly knows that something exists outside one's mind, according to Crary expresses no thought, is actually ''*meaningless* or *nonsense*'', and therefore ''can only be characterised in grammatical terms'' (ibid., pp. 280, 286). On this reading, Wittgenstein's claim that ''Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows''(1979, §151) does not mean what it seems (to me at least) to mean. It does not mean that Moore does not know what he asserts he knows but, rather, that he is not *asserting anything*. Crary maintains that Wittgenstein is not saying (as in the kind of reading presented above) that Moore unwittingly shows us that there are unquestionable and unaffirmable states of affairs underpinning our ways of thinking, judging, and acting that cannot be subjected to epistemic scrutiny. But rather that, ''since Wittgenstein isn't suggesting that any judgments are at play in Moore's anti-skeptical practice, it follows that he isn't suggesting that there are some judgments that are immune to criticism'' (Crary 2005, p. 287).[7] In a word, *On Certainty* is not about that which cannot be doubted, questioned, or affirmed propositionally, but ''a view of judgment that is the conceptual counterpart of [Wittgenstein's] view of the limits of sense''(ibid.).[8]

I find Crary's reading of *On Certainty* quite implausible, and have criticised elsewhere the New Wittgenstein position on ''the limits of sense'' from which it issues (Pleasants 2006, pp. 323–9). Apropos of Moore's *Sätze* stating things that he claimed to know with absolute certainty, Crary avers that Wittgenstein's ''point'' is that ''we reject Moore's words because here they lack any clear meaning at all'' (2005, p. 287)[9] (presumably meaning that we *should* reject his words). But this claim equivocates between ''no *clear* meaning'' and ''*no* meaning''. On the first side of the equivocation, I would say that a *Satz* not having a clear meaning is not a good reason for deciding that it is thereby ''*meaningless* or *nonsense*''. I readily agree that it is not clear how to interpret Moore's *Sätze* (I think we know what his *words* mean, though Crary and Conant deny this too). But I disagree that a *Satz* lacking clear meaning is by itself particularly remarkable or that this is what constitutes the peculiarity of Moore's *Sätze* (it is surely commonplace for *Sätze* that are not peculiar in the way that Moore's are to lack clear meaning). On the contrary, it is just this unclarity that makes it so fruitful to examine Moore's speech-acts in the way that Wittgenstein does, in particular, to compare what Moore thinks, and tells the reader, he is doing, with what he *can* do given the linguistic community to which he belongs. On the other side of the equivocation, when Wittgenstein (1979, §308) says of Moore's *Sätze* that ''not everything in the *form* of an empirical proposition *is* one'', I read him as implying that they are not *empirical* propositions, not

that they are not *propositions*. I am not concerned here with the propriety of calling such *Sätze* "propositions"; I wish only to reject the idea that Moore's (and other basic-certainty-expressing) *Sätze* express no thoughts, contain no judgements, are *meaningless* or *nonsense*, and are not even assertions. If Wittgenstein thought that Moore's *Sätze* were "*meaningless* or *nonsense*" in the New Wittgensteinian sense, that is, "mere nonsense", it is hard to see why he bothered so painstakingly to examine the particular things that Moore said. Why would Wittgenstein have written such things as: "if one doesn't marvel at the fact that the [*Sätze*] of arithmetic [...] are 'absolutely certain', then why should one be astonished that the [*Satz*] 'this is my hand' is so equally?" (1979, §448)? If the Crary/Conant claim is right, Wittgenstein would not—could not—have said this, for the *Satz* "this is my hand" can hardly be "absolutely certain" if it *has no meaning*. If Wittgenstein thought that Moore was uttering "mere nonsense" that would have been end of story, for it leaves nothing more to be said.

ii. Inviolability readings and conservatism

Crary characterises conservatism in terms of the contention that "our established practices cannot be criticised", and an "alleged inability to critically scrutinise our own practices" (2000b, p. 118; 2005, p. 278; cf. Cerbone 2003). But this is a caricature, both of inviolability readings of *On Certainty* and of actual political and ethical conservatism. For the latter clearly *does* involve the taking of a critical stance vis-à-vis *some* of our established, current practices. For example, Roger Scruton (2000), the arch conservative philosopher, denounces the institutionalised practices of factory-farming and vivisection for being impious and discordant with our natural station. Whereas, to the contrary, many who are not recognised as conservative—including a marked consensus in the scientific and medical professions, and the political left and right supporting that consensus—regard these practices as being immune to critical questioning. And are not abolitionist critics of abortion, in places where it has become an established practice, properly characterised as ethical or political conservatives? Or should we instead characterise as conservative those who hold that the right to be able to choose abortion is inviolable?

   In any case, whether or not the claim that our established practices cannot be criticised is properly attributable to any actual political conservative, such an absurdly extreme view has no affinity with the kind of reading of *On Certainty* that I endorse. Crary rightly attributes to such readings the contention that "it is impossible to question, doubt, investigate, advance knowledge-claims about" certain states of affairs that underpin our epistemic practices and ways of being in the world (2005, p. 282). The kinds of phenomena at issue, noted by Crary (ibid., p. 280), are such matters as: being a handed person; perceiving a medium-sized object at close range;

the earth having existed for much longer than a few decades. But, apart from the fact that inviolability exegetes invariably point out that such phenomena are only unquestionable (and unaffirmable) in broadly normal circumstances, they evidently are not plausible objects of *ethical* or *political* conservatism. Finding it impossible to consider that the Earth may be only a few years old, or that one could be mistaken over what one's name is, is obviously a very different matter from refusing to consider whether the practices of abortion, female circumcision, vivisection, etc. may be unjust. So-called inviolability interpretations of *On Certainty* are simply irrelevant to political and ethical conservatism, and offer no support for the hyper-generalised notion that our established practices are immune to critical reflection. The reading of *On Certainty* that I espouse has no negative bearing on the moral or political criticisability (or justifiability) of our practices, but I will proceed to show how it can illuminate what might be called the foundation of our ethical practices, and the scaffolding or framework of moral perception, inquiry, and judgement.

iii. Ethical propositions

As we have seen, exponents of intrinsically-ethical readings argue that the Tractarian view of ethics continued to inform and animate Wittgenstein's later philosophy. But I contend that Wittgenstein's later philosophy exhibits an attitude towards ethical propositions that is the antithesis of the Tractarian view. Although Wittgenstein does not consider ethical propositions in *On Certainty*, they fit nicely into its anthropological examination of knowledge and non-epistemic certainty. Of course, the epistemic status of ethical propositions is the object of much philosophical dispute, such as whether they are fact-stating or expressive; whether they state external objective facts or report subjective attitudes; whether they refer to natural, or *sui generis* moral, properties; whether their truth is intuited through some special cognitive faculty, etc. Intrinsically-ethical readers' insistence that there is no distinguishable category of ethical propositions, and their picture of the immanence of "the ethical", are moves within this metaphysical language-game.

   Adopting the perspective of *On Certainty*, as I read it, one does not muse on the nature of the ethical and where it resides, nor concern oneself with the epistemic status of ethical propositions. In practice, as we encounter or produce them in everyday life, ethical propositions are just like the other kinds of proposition (*Satz*) that Wittgenstein examines in *On Certainty*, and they repay the same kind of anthropological consideration. People are not struck with awe or puzzlement at what *kind* of phenomenon moral wrongness, obligation, prohibition, etc. ("the ethical") is *per se*, or what *kind* of knowledge or belief is expressed by ethical propositions over and above that of empirical propositions. Such thoughts usually only arise after

a certain amount of philosophical enculturation. Ethical propositions, such as "sex before marriage is wrong", "contraception is permissible", "parents should make personal sacrifices for their children's sake", or "slavery is evil", are regarded as plain statements of what (morally) is or ought to be the case. Those who believe that sex before marriage is wrong are not usually uncertain or confused about what it is or means for something to be right, wrong, or permissible. With regard to ethical propositions about which they are quite sure or absolutely certain, just as with uncontentious empirical propositions, people are not beset with worries about how or whether they know what they know, what justifies them in thinking as they do, or whether they could be mistaken about it. As with empirical propositions, ethical propositions admit varying degrees of certitude, unchallengeability, revisability, uncertainty, and contentiousness. With regard to both kinds of proposition, people's certainty and confidence range from being unshakeably sure, to completely sure, to very sure, to not very sure, to very unsure.

As noted previously, many of the states of affairs which Wittgenstein ponders in *On Certainty* look extremely odd and perplexing when put into propositional form. Propositions such as "the world has existed for much longer than 100 years", "tables, chairs, buildings, etc. do not suddenly cease to exist", "I know that this hand that I'm waving exists" take the *form* of empirical propositions but cannot actually be treated as *empirical* propositions nor become propositional knowledge. Nothing that could be proffered as evidential support or grounds for the truth of these assertions could be as certain as the very things they purport to support or ground. In such cases, attempting to adduce evidence, grounds, and reasons is not merely otiose, but betrays a misunderstanding of the nature and uses of evidence, grounds, and reasons.

Are there propositions about things of ethical concern that take the *form* of ethical propositions but which cannot actually be treated as *ethical* propositions nor become propositional knowledge? There are indeed such propositions, and one sees philosophers contemplating them à la Moore with his pseudo empirical propositions. The objects of these propositions are what I call "basic moral certainties". In exemplification, I focus on the wrongness of killing.

iv. The wrongness of murder and Moore's denial of basic moral certainty

The very same G. E. Moore who insisted that he *knew* that the hands he was waving existed and that he had never been far from the earth's surface, had previously averred that the proposition that "universal murder would not be a good thing at this moment can […] not be proved" (1903, p. 156). His reason for this agnosticism was that he thought that the thesis "the existence of human life is on the whole an evil" could not be refuted, and if it is true

then murder "would be good as a means" of reducing the amount of evil in "the Universe" (ibid., pp. 156, 148).

R. E. Ewin (1972, p. 128) charges that Moore committed a basic "logical mistake", objecting that "we can intuitively see that murder is wrong because that is what the word 'murder' means", hence the wrongness of murder—universal or otherwise—is not an open question. Ewin also states that "killing is wrong when and because it is murder" (ibid., p. 139). But not all morally wrong killings are murder (manslaughter, for example), even if "wrongful killing" is taken to be analytic to "murder". So "murder" does not *mean* "wrongful killing" in the way that "bachelor" *means* "unmarried man" (no unmarried man is not a bachelor).[10] There is, of course, a very close relation between, albeit not identity of, criminal acts and moral wrongness. But could there be murders that are not morally wrong? If the assassination of an evil tyrant can be morally just, would such an act be justified murder, or simply justified killing (aside from its legality)? One could say either that in rare cases some acts of murder might be justifiable and hence not morally wrong,[11] or that any justifiable killing is *ipso facto* not murder, hence the proposition "murder is morally wrong" is analytically true.

Moore evidently does not think that the statement "murder is morally wrong" is analytically true; indeed, he expresses uncertainty as to whether it is true at all. This is because he defines "our 'duty'" as "that action, which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative" (1903, p. 148). And of no possible act can we claim more than a probability ("even if we are entitled to assert so much") that what is "better with regard to its immediate effects will also be better on the whole" (ibid., p. 154). Further, even with regard to an act's immediate effects, "we can only hope to discover which, among a few alternatives, will *generally* produce the greatest balance of good in the immediate future". Therefore, we cannot justifiably "assert that obedience to such commands as 'Thou shalt do no murder', is *universally* better than the alternative […] of […] murder" (ibid.).[12] Moore *might* have meant to claim no more than that in some cases it is permissible to *kill* people, either through self-defence or as a foreseen but unintended consequence of action aimed at preventing a greater evil than the foreseen deaths. But given his preparedness to consider the "speedy extermination of the race" (ibid., p. 156) possibly a good thing for "the Universe", I am inclined to think that he really does contemplate the justifiability of *murder*. From the perspective of my reading of *On Certainty*, being prepared even to consider such a possibility is tantamount to renouncing the ability to make *any* moral judgement, and the hypothesis that perhaps "the existence of human life is on the whole an evil" is no more an ethical proposition than "perhaps there are no physical objects" (Wittgenstein 1979, §23) is an empirical one.

Of course, whether or not wrongfulness is analytic to "murder" concerns only how the word "murder" is in fact used. "Bachelor" means "unmarried man", so we can't sensibly ask whether all bachelors are unmarried, but we can ask what it is to be married. And if "murder" entails "wrongful killing" there is no room to ask whether murder is always wrong, but we might want to ask what the wrongness of wrongful killing consists in. Some philosophers think we must address this question,[13] for if we don't know what makes wrongful killing wrong we won't know if we are correctly judging those highly contentious cases over which there is doubt or dispute as to whether it is wrong to kill (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, non-human animals). Don Marquis, for example, in an influential article on the morality of abortion, asks: "if we merely believe, but do not understand, why killing adult human beings such as ourselves is wrong, how could we conceivably show that abortion is either immoral or permissible?" (1989, p. 189). More generally, Sumner maintains that substantive moral theories "cannot ultimately rest on mere convictions" (i.e. the conviction that killing is "such an obvious wrong"). We have to "explain why these convictions are reasonable" (1976, p. 145). I shall now survey some of the leading attempts at such explanation.

v. Philosophical explanation of the wrongness of killing

The wrongness of killing, it seems reasonable to say, inheres primarily in what the act does to its victim: it renders them dead. Being killed may, but does not necessarily, involve physical, psychological, and emotional suffering. But the specific harm inflicted by killing clearly is that of being rendered dead, otherwise killing would not differ from assault occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm. The wrongness of killing, then, is internally related to the badness of death.

However, many would claim that death in itself may not be bad, or not *all that* bad, if it comes at the end of a reasonably long and satisfactory life and does not involve much suffering.[14] It is often said of the death of an elderly person that they enjoyed "a good innings" or "lived to a ripe old age", whereas dead young people are tragically "taken before their time". But there is a much more radical claim, based on arguments propounded by the ancient Greek philosophers Epicurus and Lucretius, that flatly denies that *any* death, including untimely death, is bad *at all*. One argument is that, before his death, Smith has not died and so has not suffered the harm that death supposedly brings; but after his death, Smith no longer exists and then there is no subject left to experience the harm that death supposedly visits on him.[15] Then there is the "symmetry" argument, its premise being that an individual's life is both preceded and succeeded by an infinite temporal expanse of their non-existence. The conclusion drawn is that because it would be weird or irrational to hold an attitude of fear, dread, or regret

towards one's *pre-natal* non-existence, or to pity someone for being non-existent before they were born, it is equally irrational and unwarranted to hold these attitudes towards one's own or others' *posthumous* non-existence.[16]

But if some deaths are much worse than others—if some are personal tragedies and some are hardly bad at all—why do we not judge that the murder of an elderly person (*ceteris paribus*) does less wrong, never mind hardly any wrong, to the victim than that of a young person? If the wrongness of killing is proportional to the badness of death, and the degree of badness of death ranges from tragic to hardly bad at all, should we not conclude that some murders really do little wrong to the victim (because in being killed at "a ripe old age" the victim doesn't lose very much)? Even more sceptically, the "no-subject" and "symmetry" arguments could be seen to entail that *no killing* in which the victim has no experience of being killed is wrong either (and where the victim does experience being killed, the wrong done to them is not that they end up dead). In such cases the killing annihilates the subject of experience, *ipso facto* leaving no victim to suffer the effects of the supposed crime. Moreover, killing *ex hypothesi* merely returns a person to a state of non-existence identical to their pre-natal non-existence with regard to which their attitude when alive was one of unperturbed equanimity. Thus killing is a "victimless crime"!

Of course, it would be callous to judge that some murders are not really all that bad, and morally insane to judge that no murder, as such, wrongs its victim. Most contemporary philosophers who write about death and killing believe that death is indeed bad and killing "an obvious wrong", and that the badness is borne by, and the wrongness done to, the person killed. The theories through which they seek to explain the badness of death and wrongness of killing are typically couched in terms of some kind of loss or deprivation of something valuable to the victim, and correlatively of the victim having something of great value unjustly and unlawfully taken from them. What is lost/taken is variously identified as: the victim's future; their ability to fulfil desires and pursue projects; their ability to have pleasurable and satisfying experiences, attachments and relations; their hopes and wishes to see various things come to pass in the future. Here is a selection of such explanations:

- Death is the ultimate loss; murder therefore is the ultimate form of theft (Sumner 1976, p. 162)
- Death is a genuine evil. For death takes from us the objects of our emotional attachments (Draper 1999, p. 409)
- Killing inflicts (one of) the greatest possible losses on the victim (Marquis 1989, p. 189)
- What makes killing another human being wrong on occasions is its character as an irrevocable, maximally unjust prevention of the

realization either of the victim's life-purposes or of such life-purposes as the victim may reasonably have been expected to resume or to come to have (Young 1979, p. 519)
- Killing is wrong when and because it is murder, which is a species of injustice (Ewin 1972, p. 139)
- [What makes] killing us wrong, in general, is that it causes premature death. Premature death is a misfortune, in general, because it deprives an individual of a future of value (Marquis 1997, p. 96)
- Murder, I suggest, is harmful to its victim because it is an irreversible loss to the person who was murdered of a function or functions necessary for his worthwhile existence (Levenbook 1984, p. 412)

A conspicuous feature of all these explanations is that none of them overcomes the conundrum of their being no subject to bear the various harms/losses/deprivations specified (life-purposes, objects of emotional attachments, etc). It is telling, I think, that the explanations are all conceptually tied to our ordinary language talk of the deceased "losing" their life, and murder victims having their life "taken" or "stolen" from them. Despite their apparent sophistication, these explanations add no enlightenment to our ordinary ways of talking about the badness of death and wrongness of killing. I am tempted to suggest that they are ensnared in the "limits of language" that Wittgenstein claimed, in "Lecture on ethics", to be the inescapable condition of all (apparently) ethical propositions. Wittgenstein, it will be recalled, argued that (apparently) ethical propositions are bound within similes, analogies, metaphors and other figures of speech that have as their source the trivial or relative sense of value. Thus propositions such as "This is a good fellow", or "This man's life was valuable", use the predicates "good" and "valuable" by way of "some sort of analogy" with such propositions as "This is a good football player", and "This piece of jewellery is valuable" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 9). Wittgenstein maintains that the inescapable figurativeness of ethical propositions necessitates that we cannot specify the object of the analogy in non-figurative terms. We can specify what "good" and "valuable" mean in non-ethical propositions by reference to the states of affairs that constitute good and valuable in those contexts (good footballers are able to read what is happening and perceive possibilities on the pitch; valuable pieces of jewellery are worth a lot of money). But with ethical propositions, we can only say that "good" and "valuable" mean something like what they mean in non-ethical senses, only of course something of a different, higher, order of goodness and value than is meant in any non-ethical sense.

Although I have suggested that from the perspective of *On Certainty* ethical propositions are seen quite differently from the way in which Wittgenstein depicted them in "Lecture on ethics", I think the latter's notion of ethical propositions being bound within figurative speech offers an apt

characterisation of propositions on the badness of death and wrongness of killing. The concepts of losing and taking something of (great) value, via which that badness and wrongness are expressed, seem incapable of articulating just how bad death, and how wrong murder, are. In saying that the deceased *loses* her life, and that the murderer *takes* his victim's life, our ability to articulate this badness and wrongness is limited by the senses of "losing" and "taking" as those concepts apply to a living subject losing something of value and having something of value unlawfully and unjustly taken from them. Whilst we know well enough what it is to endure and suffer losses, deprivations, wrongs, and injustices *within* life, these concepts apply to the *cessation* or *termination* of a life only in a metaphorically extended sense. Harms and wrongs happen to, and are experienced by, a living subject. But to explain the badness and wrongness of the *end(ing)* of *that which makes it possible* for a subject to experience and endure losses, deprivations, and wrongs as itself just another—albeit "one of the greatest"—loss, deprivation, or wrong, seems woefully inadequate to the momentousness of what death and killing are.

The inescapable figurativeness of ordinary language propositions expressing the badness of death and wrongness of killing presents no impediment to the language-games via which we form and issue moral judgements and express our sadness, abhorrence and outrage at the deaths and killings we encounter and contemplate. But when this figurative language constitutes—as it inevitably does—the active ingredient of philosophical theories purporting either to disclose what the badness of death and wrongness of killing consists in, or to justify the conviction that death really *is* bad and killing wrong, the result is gross pseudo-explanation. Such theories are either tautologies dressed up as explanations, or utterly banal (under)-statements of the blatantly obvious. That death deprives its victim of their future or functions necessary for their worthwhile existence is an analytic entailment of the concept "death"; that killing is wrong because it causes premature death or prevents realisation of the victim's life-purposes is banal understatement. As Horatio said to Hamlet, "there needs no ghost…come from the grave to tell us this".[17] In a word, these philosophical theories fail to reveal anything illuminating about the badness of death and wrongness of killing, though the failure is itself illuminating, in a manner similar to Moore's failure to prove the existence of "things external to *our minds*" (1959, p. 129). They simply rephrase in grandiloquent philosophical language what anyone already knows[18] just in virtue of being able to use the concepts "death" and "killing" appropriately.

Philosophical propositions on the badness of death and wrongness of killing exhibit an even more striking oddity: they are utterly *absurd* and, depending on context and sense of humour, amusingly so. The detached scholarly context of philosophical discussion on death and killing masks this absurdity, but it would surely become starkly apparent if these explanations

were presented in speech-acts outside of a philosophical context. Under what conditions, for which purpose, could one sensibly offer such explanations of the wrongness of killing as: "killing is wrong because it is an irrevocable, maximally unjust prevention of the realisation of the victim's life-purposes", or "murder is harmful to its victim because it is an irreversible loss to the person who was murdered of a function or functions necessary for his worthwhile existence"? Perhaps I have an unhealthily dark sense of humour, but I see in such imagined scenarios greater potential for mirth than Wittgenstein's suggestion that the interjection "I *know* I am in pain" could only be meant as a joke (1968, §246). But philosophical theories presented as explanatory speech-acts could also be deeply offensive. Imagine writing in a letter of condolence: "death is troubling partly because it involves a sharp decline from being a recipient of life's benefits to not being a recipient of those benefits" (Draper 1999, p. 409n24). Or imagine offering the foregoing philosophical wisdom to a terminally ill friend who has confided that she is scared of dying. The potential humour or offensiveness of such speech-acts does not really need further analysis or demonstration. Suffice it to say that it emanates from the incongruity of saying something that is so spectacularly discordant with the profundity of what is supposedly being explained (the badness of death and wrongness of killing), and the offensiveness in saying something so insensitively flippant when respect and gravitas are called for.

However impressed one might be by the sceptical "no-subject" and "symmetry" arguments for the non-badness of death, their conclusions cannot be accepted for they are plainly absurd, or rather would lead to absurd consequences if taken seriously, not the least of which would be the non-wrongness of any killing. Contemporary loss/deprivation theories share the common intuition that the badness of death varies according to the degree of its prematurity. They therefore face the disturbing consequence that by their own explanatory principle the degree of wrongness inflicted on murder victims varies too (according to how much and what quality is taken): if an elderly murder victim did not have much life of value left, the murderer did not take much from them. The sceptical arguments no more unsettle our convictions on the badness of death and wrongness of killing than those contemporary theories that purport to explain and justify them succeed in doing so. The fact that philosophical analysis and theory cannot subvert, explain, or justify our natural convictions is pointedly indicative of the existential status of the objects of those arguments and explanations.

vi. The badness of death and wrongness of killing as basic moral certainties

I have noted some striking peculiarities of philosophical explanations of the badness of death and wrongness of killing which show these explanations to be just as peculiar, propositionally, as Moore's proofs. These peculiarities

are, I suggest, symptomatic of the objects of the explanations being basic certainties, like the empirical ones examined in *On Certainty*. Being basic certainties, the badness of death and wrongness of killing cannot—without engendering the oddities witnessed above—be affirmed or doubted, nor treated as propositional knowledge.

However, it might be objected that death being bad and killing wrong is actually not beyond question, affirmation, or explanation (a basic certainty) since in some cases death really is not bad and killing not wrong. The latter observation is correct, but applies equally to the basic empirical certainties exhibited by Moore. There could be (extraordinary) circumstances in which someone might be mistaken in the claim to be in possession of their hand – in the turmoil of battlefield carnage, for example. The objects of Moore's assertions are basic certainties only because by design he pronounces knowledge-claims on the existence of things in circumstances in which there was not and could not be any doubt about their existence.[19] An "ethical" analogue of Moore's "performance epistemology" would have someone (perhaps Moore himself, in a companion essay proving that at least *some* things are bad and *some* acts morally wrong) asserting such things as: "it would be a bad thing if I were to die right now", or "the killing of Martin Luther King was wrong".[20] The fact that in some (special) circumstances death may not be bad, or rather not the worst outcome, and killing not wrong, does not undermine the basic certainty of their badness and wrongness in most circumstances. For death is only not bad (perhaps) when it brings unbearable suffering to an end, the badness of which is itself a basic certainty (in which case, death is still *bad*, but the alternative—unbearably painful existence, wherein life has effectively ended anyway—is worse). And killing is only not wrong (perhaps) when done to save others from being killed. So, basic certainty of the badness of death and wrongness of killing is itself an essential condition of those special circumstances in which particular deaths may not be bad and particular killings may not be wrong.

Every competent moral agent regards murder as morally abhorrent. But how would people respond to the question: "*What* is wrong with killing innocent human beings, in normal circumstances; that is, killings which are murder?"? Some, no doubt, would simply assert emphatically (à la Moore insisting that he *knows* that his hand exists), but pleonastically, "It just is wrong". Some might attempt a more contentful answer, such as "Because it violates the fundamental right to life", but this just side-steps the question without answering it. The typical response, I suggest, would be one of puzzlement and vexation, not knowing how to answer the question, and perhaps not knowing whether to take it seriously. Wittgenstein says on a number of occasions in *On Certainty* that were we to encounter someone who asserted either that he knew or doubted that some objects of basic empirical certainty exist, we would have reason to doubt his sanity. Likewise, were we to encounter someone who asserted either that he knew

or doubted that murder is wrong, we would have reason to regard her as a corrupt or incompetent moral agent.

If empirical belief, judgement, and enquiry *presuppose* the spatial-temporal existence of things, then moral belief, judgement, and reflection *presuppose* that there are bad things to endure and which it is wrong to inflict on (and, perhaps, allow to happen to) others. To assert (pointing to some particular child) "it is *wrong* to kill this child" is the moral equivalent of asserting (whilst displaying one's hand) "I *know* that this hand exists". That it is wrong to kill an innocent person, is just as certain as any logical or analytic truth, or any object of basic empirical certainty. But this certainty is not, and cannot be, expressed via propositions of affirmation or confirmation. Rather, it is manifest in how we live and conduct ourselves, how we respond to sad events and wrongful acts, and in what we say in the ethical propositions that we produce as expressions of sadness and condemnation directed at such events and acts. We condemn particular acts *because* they involve the killing of innocent people, but it would be preposterous to append to our condemnation the proposition "it is wrong to kill innocent people". So far from counting as an *ethical* proposition, saying such a thing exhibits a *lack* of moral understanding or seriousness.

Because of the role and significance that death, and hence killing, has for us in our personal, social and moral lives, the *Sätze* "death is bad" and "killing is wrong" are not, and cannot become, propositional knowledge for us. As with Moore's pseudo-empirical propositions, these assertions are only formulated into propositional form by sceptical or realist moral philosophers playing a very cultist language-game, and it is then that peculiar results ensue, with people not knowing how to justify what seems so undeniably obvious as to be unsayable. We cannot sensibly affirm these propositions because we can offer nothing to justify them, no evidence, reasons, or grounds; or rather, as we have seen, no justification or explanation as compelling as the object of supposed justification/explanation. We *have* no evidence, reasons, or grounds for regarding death as bad and killing wrong, just as we have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for acting in ways that presuppose we know what our name is and that people's hands won't fall off when we shake them. What Wittgenstein says of "the language-game"[21] serves as an even more poignantly apposite characterisation of our basic certainty on the badness of death and wrongness of killing:

> it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).
> It is there—like our life (1979, §559).

Given the nature of the arguments to which Wittgenstein was responding in *On Certainty*, his method was to try to show that Moore did not know what he insisted that he did *know*. Wittgenstein argued that Moore did not know that the objects of basic empirical certainty featuring in his proof existed,

because he would have been unable to explain *how* he knew it, and unable to offer any reason, evidence or grounds to support his claim to know it. My argument for basic moral certainty proceeds similarly. Given the conspicuous inability of laypeople or philosophers to say or explain what the badness of death and wrongness of killing consists in, I conclude that one cannot sensibly affirm that (or question whether) death is bad and killing wrong. Conversely, because the badness of death and wrongness of killing are basic moral certainties, their badness and wrongness admits of no explanation, elaboration, or justification. It is not just that the philosophical theories proffered thus far fail to accomplish the task, but that no explanation or justification *could* do it. As Wittgenstein says (on explanations of value): "whatever one said to me, I would reject it; not indeed because the explanation is false but because it is an *explanation*" (quoted by Waismann 1965, pp. 15–6). One could say, paraphrasing Wittgenstein (1979, §341), that basic moral certainty of the badness of death and wrongness of killing functions as the hinge on which enquiry into the rightness or permissibility of particular acts, practices and institutions involving the death and killing of various kinds and states of beings turns. So whilst propositions that express basic moral certainty are, to use Crary's term, inviolable, the proper objects of practical ethical enquiry—abortion, euthanasia, use of animals, duties to distant destitute people, etc.—are not beyond critical scrutiny, and there is no conservative implication of so-called inviolability readings of *On Certainty* to suggest that they are.[22]

Notes

1. Crary talks undiscriminatingly of "our linguistic practices" and "our practices" (e.g. 2005, 278, where this occurs in the same sentence).
2. Wittgenstein's distinction is reminiscent of Kant's distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, except that Wittgenstein insists that no propositional content can be given to one side of the distinction.
3. It might be rejoined that the immanence of "the ethical" makes it not a possible *object*, but rather a *condition*, of experience. But this rejoinder belongs to the same kind of metaphysical language-game as that played by those that New Wittgensteinians accuse of arrogating an illusory/delusory birds-eye view of "language" and "the world" as such. Given that Crary characterises New Wittgensteinians as being committed to the renunciation of "metaphysical theories" and the possibility of "a point of view on language as if from outside from which *we* imagine that we can get a clear view of the relation between language and the world" (2000a, pp. 1, 6), one wonders how they manage to attain a viewpoint from which to (think they can?) discern the omni-pervasiveness of "the ethical"?
4. Moore contrasts what he (says he) *knows* to be the case with "merely something which I believed" (1959, p. 146).
5. I mean it is true that the hand that Moore was exhibiting did indeed exist when he asserted "Here is one hand", not that it is true that he *knew* that he had that hand, as he asserted. Wittgenstein's objection was that Moore did not know what he asserted he

knew, not that what he asserted was not true. Crary, and other New Wittgensteinians, would reject the foregoing because they maintain that such utterances are *unintelligible*, hence incapable of truth or falsity, and therefore are not even assertions (I address this view in the following section).

6. It might be objected that Wittgenstein does say here that we have knowledge, *of some kind*, of the objects of basic certainty (Michael Hauskeller put this objection to me). But this is knowledge only in the attenuated metaphorical sense in which we say in ordinary language that someone "knows what she's doing", meaning simply that she's a competent performer, or that she can be held responsible for what she does, not that she stands in an epistemic relation to the taken-for-granted nature and conditions of her action.

7. As James Conant (1998, p. 224) puts the point, the kind of reading of *On Certainty* that I outlined above "presupposes… that there is an 'it'—a judgement that thus-and-so— which cannot be doubted (and hence cannot be claimed as a piece of knowledge)".

8. As with their reading of the *Tractatus*, the Crary/Conant reading of *On Certainty* requires an ingenious, but convoluted, interpretive story to explain away Wittgenstein's *seeming* to have something to say—about the role of basic certainty in our epistemic practices, and about language and its relation to reality, respectively.

9. Cf. Conant on Moore's *Sätze*: "it is not clear, when these words are called upon in this context, *what* is being said—if anything" (1998, p. 241).

10. Moral wrongfulness does not feature in any of the eight definitions of "murder" listed in my dictionary, where the primary definition given is *unlawful* killing—"the unlawful premeditated killing of one human being by another" (*Collins English Dictionary*, Fifth Edition, 2000).

11. L. W. Sumner, for example, asserts that "not all instances of murder are morally wrong", and even—most implausibly—claims that "this contention is common to utilitarianism and most other moral theories" (1976, p. 147).

12. Ewin (1972, p. 128) misreads Moore when he says that "it was only occasional murder that he thought he had shown to be wrong". Moore does not claim even this much; he claims only to have shown that "in all known conditions of society" where the rate of murder falls well short of universality, "it is *generally* wrong for any single person to commit murder" (1903, p. 156, my emphasis).

13. For Feldman (1992, p. 157), the inability to "explain why it is wrong to kill people" is "one of the most notorious scandals of moral philosophy". It was Kant's complaint that it "remains a scandal to philosophy" that "the existence of things outside of us... must be accepted merely on faith" to which Moore (1959, p. 127) was responding in his "Proof of an external world".

14. This is the response I've often elicited upon asking people what they think the badness of death consists in.

15. As Wittgenstein put it: "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death" (1988, 6.4311).

16. See Rosenbaum (1989) for a contemporary defence of this argument.

17. In admonishment to Hamlet for his tautologous statement that there is a "villain" in Denmark who is an "arrant knave" (Act I, scene V).

18. I mean "knows" in the figurative sense specified in note 6.

19. As Wittgenstein points out, "one may be wrong even about 'there being a hand here'. Only in particular circumstances is it impossible" (1979, §25). It is the latter that Moore sought to exploit.

20. After writing this I came across Renford Bambrough's "proof that we have moral knowledge", which proceeds "by an exactly analogous argument" to Moore's. Bambrough's proof consists in "saying, 'we know that this child, who is about to undergo what would otherwise be painful surgery, should be given an anaesthetic before

the operation. Therefore we know at least one moral proposition to be true' '' (1979, p. 15).

21. In my view, Wittgenstein uses the term ''language-game'' in *On Certainty* in a very loose, non-specific, non-conceptual way (much more so than in *Philosophical Investigations*). In this remark, ''the language-game'' is just shorthand for: Our routine ways of going on in the world of familiar things and familiar practices. Elsewhere, Wittgenstein refers to ''the human language-game'' (1979, §554).

22. Alice Crary kindly sent me a pre-publication copy of her paper ''Wittgenstein and ethics'', and I am very grateful for the stimulation it provided. I have been greatly helped also by the comments of Adrian Haddock and Michael Hauskeller. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock has been especially helpful and supportive.

References

Bambrough, R. (1979) *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (London: Routledge).

Cerbone, D. (2003) ''The limits of conservatism: Wittgenstein on 'our life' and 'our concepts''', in: C. Heyes (Ed.), *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Theory*, pp. 43–62 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

Conant, J. (2000) ''Elucidation and nonsense in Frege and early Wittgenstein'', in: A. Crary & R. Read (Eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 174–217 (London: Routledge).

Conant, J. (1998) ''Wittgenstein on meaning and use'', *Philosophical Investigations*, 21(3), pp. 222–250.

Crary, A. (2005) ''Wittgenstein and ethics: a discussion with reference to *On Certainty*'', in: D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. Brenner (Eds), *Readings of Wittgenstein's* On Certainty, pp. 275–301 (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Crary, A. & Read, R. (Eds) (2000) *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge).

Crary, A. (2000a) ''Introduction'', in: A. Crary & R. Read (Eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 1–18 (London: Routledge).

Crary, A. (2000b) ''Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to political thought'', in: A. Crary & R. Read (Eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 118–145 (London: Routledge).

Diamond, C. (2000) ''Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'', in: A. Crary & R. Read (Eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 149–173 (London: Routledge).

Draper, K. (1999) ''Disappointment, sadness, and death'', *The Philosophical Review*, 108(3), pp. 387–414.

Edwards, J. (1982) *Ethics without philosophy: Wittgenstein and the moral life* (Florida: University Press).

Ewin, R. (1972) ''What is wrong with killing people?'', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 22(87), pp. 126–139.

Feldman, F. (1992) *Confrontations With The Reaper: Philosophical Study of The Nature and Value of Death* (Oxford: University Press).

Levenbook, B. (1984) ''Harming someone after his death'', *Ethics*, 94(3), pp. 407–419.

Marquis, D. (1989) ''Why abortion is immoral'', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86(4), pp. 183–202.

Marquis, D. (1997) ''An argument that abortion is wrong'', in: H. LaFollette (Ed.), *Ethics in Practice*, pp. 91–102 (Oxford: Blackwell), (revised version of Marquis[1989]).

Moore, G. (1959) *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin).

Moore, G. (1903) *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: University Press).

Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2005) ''Unravelling certainty'', in: Moyal-Sharrock & Brenner (2005), pp. 76–99.

Moyal-Sharrock, D. & Brenner, W. (Eds) (2005) *Readings of Wittgenstein's* On Certainty (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Mulhall, S. (2002) ''Ethics in the light of Wittgenstein'', *Philosophical Papers*, 31(3), pp. 293–321.

Pleasants, N. (2006) ''Nonsense on stilts? Wittgenstein, ethics, and the lives of animals'', *Inquiry*, 49(4), pp. 314–336.

Rhees, R. (1965) ''Some developments in Wittgenstein's view of ethics'', *Philosophical Review*, 74(1), pp. 17–26.

Rosenbaum, S. (1989) ''The symmetry argument: Lucretius against the fear of death'', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50(2), pp. 353–373.

Scruton, R. (2000) *Animal Rights and Wrongs* (London: Demos).

Steiner, G. (1967) ''To civilise our gentlemen'', in: *Language and Silence*, pp. 75–88 (London: Faber).

Stroll, A. (2005) ''Why *On Certainty* matters'', in: D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. Brenner (Eds), *Readings of Wittgenstein's* On Certainty, pp. 33–46 (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Sumner, L. (1976) ''A matter of life and death'', *Noûs*, 10(2), pp. 145–171.

Waismann, F. (1965) ''Notes on talks with Wittgenstein'', *Philosophical Review*, 74(1), pp. 12–16.

Wittgenstein, L. (1965) ''Lecture on ethics'', *Philosophical Review*, 74(1), pp. 3–12.

Wittgenstein, L. [1953] (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, G.E.M. (Oxford: Blackwell).

Wittgenstein, L. [1958] (1972) *The Blue and Brown books* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Wittgenstein, L. [1969] (1979) *On Certainty*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe & D. Paul (Oxford: Blackwell).

Wittgenstein, L. [1922] (1988) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge).

Young, R. (1979) ''What is so wrong with killing people?'', *Philosophy*, 54(210), pp. 515–528.