Introduction

We dedicate this Element to Avrum Stroll.

This Element seeks to elucidate Wittgenstein's groundbreaking discussion of knowledge and certainty and its impact on epistemology, particularly as regards the nature of our most basic commitments and their relevance for the problem of radical scepticism. Our focus will be on Wittgenstein's remarks in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, but the themes being explored reach right back to the *Tractatus* as well as to other works leading to, and broadly contemporaneous with, *On Certainty*.

On Certainty has prompted differing interpretative readings. These differences mostly pertain to the nature of Wittgenstein's notion of certainty. Is it epistemic (a kind of knowledge)? Is it propositional? Is it animal? Is it foundational? Does it succeed in confounding radical scepticism? Philosophers interpret Wittgenstein differently on these issues. And where they agree that Wittgenstein holds a particular view, they sometimes disagree with it.

We think the disparity of views regarding Wittgenstein's reconceptualisation of basic certainty and its relation to knowledge makes co-authorship of this Element a good idea. Its authors – though very close in their understanding of *On Certainty* – differ on some key questions, such as whether our basic certainties are to be understood propositionally. On other issues – such as whether Wittgenstein thought our basic commitments are objects of knowledge and whether he succeeds in confounding radical scepticism – they are fellow travellers.

Wittgenstein's notion of certainty has been gaining wider recognition in philosophy, and we should welcome the recent arrival on the epistemology scene of 'hinge epistemology'.[1] This new branch of epistemology has arisen from the growing acknowledgement that Wittgenstein's notion of basic certainty – these days called 'hinge certainty' for reasons discussed in the Element – raises important questions for, indeed arguably supersedes, mainstream accounts of basic beliefs and radical scepticism. It should also be noted, though the topic of this Element prevents us from engaging the discussion further, that hinge certainty has impacted many disciplines beyond philosophy, such as cognitive science, psychology, gender studies, education, primatology, law, literature and religion.

While both authors have collaborated throughout on producing this manuscript, the Element is divided into two main sections that are primarily authored separately. Section 1 is written by Moyal-Sharrock. It covers the main themes of *On Certainty*, sometimes comparing or contrasting them to pre-*On Certainty* texts. It also makes the case for a non-propositional reading of our basic hinge certainty. Section 2 is written by Pritchard. Its focus is on the way the core ideas

[1] See Coliva & Moyal-Sharrock (2017) and Sandis & Moyal-Sharrock (2022).

from *On Certainty* have impacted contemporary epistemology, especially with regard to the recent debate about radical scepticism.

1 Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty

We begin our exploration of Wittgenstein on knowledge and certainty with the words of two philosophers who, each in his own way, importantly contributed to what we know as *On Certainty*: Norman Malcolm and G. H. von Wright. Here is Malcolm, whose discussions with Wittgenstein on Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925) and 'Proof of an External World' (1939) were to significantly inspire the notes that make up *On Certainty*:[2]

> *On Certainty* is a brilliant illustration of the novelty of Wittgenstein's thinking. The concepts of certainty and knowledge have received a vast amount of study in the history of philosophy. Wittgenstein presents an entirely fresh way of viewing these concepts. (2018, 671)

As for Von Wright, he was the co-editor – with Elizabeth Anscombe – of the selection of notes that make up *On Certainty*:

> Wittgenstein's treatise on certainty can be said to summarize some of the essential novelties of his thinking. . . . The book opens new vistas on his philosophical achievement. (1982, 166)

1.1 The *Tractatus* as Precursor to *On Certainty*

The following paragraph is from von Wright's book *Wittgenstein*:

> In the preface to the *Tractatus*, [*Wittgenstein*] said: ' The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking but to the expression of thoughts; for in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).' Very much the same thing he could have said in a preface, had he ever written one, to his last writings, those published under the title *On Certainty*. Beyond everything we know or conjecture or think of as true there is a foundation of accepted truth without which there would be no such thing as knowing or conjecturing or thinking things true. But to think of the things, whereof this foundation is made, as **known** to us or as **true** is to place them among the things which stand on this very foundation, is to view the receptacle as another object *within*. This clearly cannot be done. If the foundation is what we have to accept before we say of anything that it is known or true, then it cannot itself be known or true. . . . What Moore called 'common sense' . . . is very much the same thing as that which Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* would have referred to as 'the limits of the world'. Wittgenstein's high appreciation of Moore's article must partly have stemmed from the fact

[2] See Malcolm (2018), 660–64.

> that he recognized in Moore's efforts a strong similarity with his own. And his criticism of Moore in *On Certainty* we could, in the language of the *Tractatus,* characterize as a criticism of an attempt to say the unsayable. (von Wright 1982, 175–76)

Although Wittgenstein came to recant the *Tractatus*,[3] he had sown a seed there which was to grow throughout his philosophy and bloom to full fruition in *On Certainty*. This seed is the realisation that sense has *nonsensical* limits, or foundations: foundations that are not themselves endowed with sense and are not therefore, strictly speaking, *sayable*. That is, they can be verbalized, as one would verbalize a rule, but because a rule is neither true nor false, it is not propositional, not endowed with sense. Later, Wittgenstein will call these limits 'grammar' and expand his notion of grammar to include a brand of certainty that is at the foundation not only of sense, but of knowledge. He will metaphorically compare this certainty to the 'hinges' that must be there for the door of knowledge to turn (OC §343).

Nonsense, *the ineffable* (or *unsayable*), *grammar*, *knowledge*, *certainty*: these are the key notions that will occupy us here. Wittgenstein either modifies or relocates them all. We shall see that certainty becomes, in Wittgenstein's hands, a new animal: often called 'hinge certainty'[4] and, less often, 'objective certainty',[5] it is internally linked to nonsense, ineffability and grammar – all terms that Wittgenstein modifies or refines. As for *knowledge*, Wittgenstein relocates it. In fact, he effects a major shift in epistemology when he divests knowledge (more or less: justified true belief) of its foundational status, which he attributes to *certainty*.

Whereas the early Wittgenstein is concerned with understanding the limits of *sense* – what enables us to make or express sense and can therefore not itself be endowed with sense, the third Wittgenstein[6] will be concerned with the limits or foundations of *knowledge*: what makes knowing possible and cannot therefore itself be an object of knowledge. These foundations, he will call 'grammar' or 'norms of description' (OC §167; §321). Note, however, that for Wittgenstein, grammar is not comprised merely of syntactic rules but of all the conditions for intelligibility: it is the basis from which we can make sense and acquire knowledge. Some of these conditions of intelligibility are due to convention[7]

[3] See, for example, Hacker (2001) and Moyal-Sharrock (2007a).
[4] See Coliva & Moyal-Sharrock (2017).
[5] See, for example, Svensson (1981, 84ff) and Stroll (2002, 449ff) who refer exclusively to 'objective certainty'; I initially referred to both 'objective certainty' and 'hinge certainty' (e.g., Moyal-Sharrock 2005), but then used the latter exclusively.
[6] 'The third Wittgenstein' (see Moyal-Sharrock 2004) refers to the post-*Investigations* Wittgenstein: essentially *Remarks* and *Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, *Remarks on Colour* and *On Certainty*.
[7] 'Grammar consists of conventions' (PG §138).

(e.g., 'This is (what we call) a chair'; 'A rod has a length'; '2+2=4'), keeping in mind that conventions are not always due to a concerted consensus, but to an unconcerted agreement in practice. Other conditions for intelligibility are natural or acquired (causally, through enculturation or repeated exposure (OC §143)). These conditions of sense can be verbalised (e.g., 'There exist people other than myself'; 'Human babies cannot feed themselves'). Our meaningful use of words (e.g., 'There are two people in the other room' or 'I'll go feed the baby') is logically based on such norms of description or rules of grammar. They constitute 'the substratum of all [our] enquiring and asserting' (OC §162). 'If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true* nor yet false' (OC §205), writes Wittgenstein. The ground, he will argue in *On Certainty*, is logical or grammatical. We shall have more to say on the logico-grammatical nature of our foundations.

As von Wright put it: 'If the foundation is what we have to accept before we say of anything that it is known or true, then it cannot itself be known or true.' von Wright's use of the word 'accept' is not fortuitous: he wants to avoid describing the foundation as something that results from reasoning or justification, thereby underlining the fact that, for Wittgenstein, knowledge does not go all the way down. What underpins knowledge is what has come to be called, due to this famous metaphor, 'hinge certainty':

> That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC §341)

Now let us see how some of the seeds of hinge certainty – nonsense, ineffability and grammar – are, as von Wright was right to suggest, sown in Wittgenstein's early work.

1.2 Nonsense, Ineffability and Grammar

What Wittgenstein means by 'nonsense' was the main object of what we might call 'the *Tractatus* wars',[8] which originated with the publication of *The New Wittgenstein* (Crary & Read 2000). In that volume, so-called New Wittgensteinians rebuked 'ineffabilists' – philosophers who, like Peter Hacker, view some nonsense in the *Tractatus* as 'illuminating' – for 'chickening out', for not being 'resolute' enough to recognise that Wittgenstein viewed *all* nonsense as 'plain nonsense'; that is, gibberish. This was unwarranted: Wittgenstein was clear on what he took to be nonsense – and it was not all 'plain nonsense'.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein viewed as either senseless or nonsensical any expression that does not 'add to our knowledge' (cf. LE 44) – in other words,

[8] An expression used by Read & Lavery (2011).

that is not a proposition of natural science (§6.53). The nonsensical included ethics and aesthetics (§6.421), the mystical (§6.522) and his own Tractarian sentences (§6.54). None of these have sense – none are bipolar propositions susceptible of truth and falsity – and cannot therefore add to our knowledge. Indeed, even his own Tractarian sentences do not add to our knowledge; they elucidate (§6.54), which is the rightful task of philosophy (§4.112). Not adding to knowledge makes Tractarian *Sätze* technically nonsensical, devoid of sense. This, however, is a *nonderogatory* use of nonsense. When something does not make sense either because it is *impossible to put into words* (e.g., the mystical, ethics and aesthetics[9]); or because it *enables* or *regulates* sense (e.g., 'There is only one 1' (§4.1272)); or because it *elucidates* (the bounds of) sense (e.g., the nonsensicality of Tractarian remarks), it is nonsensical, in a *nonderogatory* use of the term. In fact, nonsense that regulates sense is one of the early manifestations of what Wittgenstein will later call 'grammar'; and as we shall see, hinge certainties are a later manifestation of regulatory or enabling nonsense. By contrast, nonsense, understood in a derogatory way, results from a *violation* of sense, as when categorial boundaries are misread and allowed to overlap (e.g., 'Is the good more or less identical than the beautiful?' (§4.003); '2+2 at 3 o'clock equals 4' (§4.1272)). *This* nonsense is plain nonsense, gibberish.[10]

It is clear, then, that the *Tractatus* contains different understandings of nonsense, not a uniquely derogatory one.[11] It was a mistake on the part of New Wittgensteinians to insist on a monochrome, 'austere', reading of nonsense as exclusively gibberish. This resulted in viewing Tractarian sentences as gibberish – a consequence they embraced, with no enduring success.

What of ineffability? Inasmuch as in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein takes only truth-conditional utterances to be sayable (§6.53),[12] any string of words that does not express a truth-conditional proposition is not, technically speaking, *sayable*. On that count, all nonsense is *ineffable*. However, as regards important

[9] Ethics, aesthetics and the mystical 'cannot be put into words'. (TLP §6.421; §6.522).

[10] See Moyal-Sharrock (2007a) for a more elaborate discussion of the different uses of nonsense in the *Tractatus*.

[11] The first sentence in the 'Lecture on Ethics' passage (earlier) already shows Wittgenstein alluding to different uses of nonsense; but he was to make this clearer: '[. . .] the word 'nonsense' is used to exclude certain things [. . .] for different reasons' (AWL 64). By the time of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the terms 'nonsense', 'senseless', 'has no sense' indiscriminately to refer to combinations of words that are excluded from the language, 'withdrawn from circulation' (PI §500), and insists that this exclusion may be for different reasons:

> To say 'This combination of words makes no sense (*hat keinen Sinn*)' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. (PI §499)

[12] '[. . .] what can be said; i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy' (TLP §6.53).

nonsense, the mystical, ethics and aesthetics cannot even be put into words, whereas regulative and elucidatory nonsense, though not *sayable* strictly speaking, can be formulated for heuristic purposes. That is, they can be formulated to serve as steps towards a clearer access to, and demarcation of, the conditions of sense or 'limit to thought' (TLP Preface). This applies to Tractarian remarks, which must be passed over in silence in that they are not hypothetical propositions but the 'steps' or 'ladder' to intelligibility or perspicuity (§6.54). Once used, the ladder must be thrown away (§6.54), for these heuristic aids do not belong to the sphere of language but to its delimitation. They belong to what Wittgenstein will later call the *scaffolding of thought* (OC §211).

The later Wittgenstein will extend the list of the *sayable* to include non-truth-conditional uses of language (e.g., spontaneous utterances, questions, imperatives),[13] but he will never give up the idea that some things cannot meaningfully be *said* 'in the flow of the language-game'; or the idea that some things cannot be put into words *at all* but can only show themselves *through* words (e.g., literary content) and, he will add, through deeds. We shall see that he adds hinge certainties to the list of the ineffable – the grammatical ineffable. All hinge certainties – including such certainties as 'The earth existed long before my birth' (OC §288) – though they appear to be empirical propositions are bounds of sense, not objects of sense; and hence uttering them in the flow of the language game as if they were susceptible of doubt or verification is uttering nonsense, in its *nonderogatory* sense. The same goes for propositions like 'There are physical objects': '"There are physical objects" is nonsense' (OC 35). It is not, however – as Pritchard contends (see, for example, 2.2, 2.4) – *plain* nonsense. I discuss this further in 1.7.

This, then, is how the *Tractatus* sets the stage for what Wittgenstein will later call 'grammar'. The Tractarian 'limits of sense' foreshadow Wittgensteinian grammar, but so do the Tractarian 'limits of the world' foreshadow what Moore called 'common sense' and Wittgenstein will metaphorically call 'background', 'foundations' or 'hinges' – all of which belong to grammar. As Wittgenstein will say: 'everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic' (OC §56).

1.3 Knowledge Is *Not* Foundational

Wittgenstein's interest in Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925) prompted the notes that make up *On Certainty*, and this interest was reawakened by discussions he had with Norman Malcolm in the summer of 1949 in Cornell[14] on that paper and on Moore's 'Proof of an External World' (1939). In these notes, Wittgenstein examines Moore's affirmation that he *knows* such

[13] See also (PI §23). [14] See Malcolm (2018).

things as 'Human beings are born and die', 'The earth has existed long before I was born', 'I am standing here', 'I have two hands', 'Here 🖐 is a hand'. Moore does not see his inability to *prove* he knows such things as invalidating; he insists that he cannot but 'know' that 'Here 🖐 is a hand':

> How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking . . .. (Moore 1939, 146–47)

On Moore's view, then, we can *know* things that we cannot prove. Indeed, he will claim that all mediated knowledge must eventually terminate in unmediated, or 'immediate knowledge':

> if any proposition whatever is ever known by us mediately, or because some other proposition is known from which it follows, some one proposition at least, must also be known by us immediately, or not merely because some other proposition is known from which it follows. (Moore 1957: 141–42; see also 122–23)

What he calls 'immediate knowledge' is knowledge that is not derived:[15] for the regress to stop, some claims to know must be immediate, not susceptible of justification. For Moore, then, some knowledge is foundational.

Solving the problem of infinite regress is, of course, crucial, but one ought not do so by insisting that therefore *knowledge* must be basic. Moore's notion of 'immediate knowledge' has been questioned,[16] but the real problem lies in seeking to revamp 'knowledge' in the first place. For the concept of knowledge as involving some variant of truth and justification has had a prosperous history and continues to serve (as even Gettier recognized). Rather than attempting to repair the perennial regress problem by reconceptualising knowledge, divesting it of its longstanding components, we should instead ask what more fundamental doxastic attitude might be underpinning it. This is what Wittgenstein does in *On Certainty*. He takes on Moore's supercilious challenge – 'You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking' (1939, 147):

> I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry. (OC §151)

> . . . how do I *know* that it is my hand? Do I even here know exactly what it means to say it is my hand? – When I say 'how do I know?' I do not mean that

[15] Another notable attempt at a sort of immediate knowledge was Bertrand Russell's 'knowledge by acquaintance' which he distinguished from 'knowledge by description' (Russell 1910; 1912: Ch. 5).

[16] See, for example, Malmgrem (1983).

> I have the least *doubt* of it. What we have here is a foundation for all my action. But it seems to me that it is wrongly expressed by the words 'I know'. (OC §414)

> To say of man, in Moore's sense, that he *knows* something; that what he says is therefore unconditionally the truth, seems wrong to me. – It is the truth only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of his language-games. (OC §403)

Wittgenstein is clear: Moore does not *know* that he is now standing up and talking or that what he is waving is a hand. He refers to his assurance of these things as 'knowledge' because that is to him the concept that expresses the greatest degree of conviction on our epistemic spectrum. Wittgenstein agrees that Moore's assurance is indubitable; but disagrees that it is knowledge. This is because knowing is for Wittgenstein – as it is in our epistemic practices – an achievement; something we come to; something of which we can retrace the steps and invoke the grounds:

> One says 'I know' when one is ready to give compelling grounds. 'I know' relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. (OC §243)

> [When] Moore says he knows the earth existed etc., . . . has he . . . got the right *ground* for his conviction? For if not, then after all he doesn't *know*. (OC §91)

Only in very special circumstances, such as after an accident, is it possible for someone to *find out* or *make sure* that they have two hands:

> If I don't know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he *knows* it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc. My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. (OC §23)

Outside of such special circumstances, it is not possible to make sure that one has two hands; and, therefore, not possible to *know* it. However, as Malcolm recounts, Wittgenstein makes a concession: there *can* be uses of 'I know' where it is *not* sensible to speak of 'making sure', but only outside of philosophical contexts:

> There is an ordinary use of 'I know' when there isn't any making sure. For example, a sighted person could say it to a blind man who asks 'Are you sure that it's a tree?' And also when we have completed an investigation we can say, 'I know now that it's a tree.' Another example: if you and I were coming through woods towards a house and I broke out into the clearing and there was the house right before me, I might exclaim 'There's the house.' You, back in the bushes, might ask doubtfully 'Are you sure?', and I should reply 'I