Final draft

Resisting Moral Conservatism with Difficulties of Reality: A Wittgensteinian-Diamondian Approach to Animal Ethics

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Abstract

In this paper we explore Cora Diamond's idea of "thinking guides". The metaphor refers to signposts that guide moral thought such as "slavery is unjust and insupportable". Diamond understands these propositions as non-bipolar because they are not doubtable. In this sense, they can be framed as certainties in morals. However, Diamond's example doesn't qualify as a certainty of this sort. Drawing on recent discussions in ethics in the Wittgensteinian tradition, we show that there are two types of certainties in morals: TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS. The former, such as "Equals are to be treated equally and unequals unequally" are non-bipolar; negating them is not irrational but a-rational. The latter have an intelligible counterpart that may turn out to be irrational. Thinking guides belong in this category, as they structure thinking with respect to content, but they are also reminiscent of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES, as they can be framed as *quasi*-undoubtable.

Keywords

In ordinary moral life, we find propositions that seem so obviously true that few, if any of us, would dispute that they are certain. They are usually accompanied, perhaps only implicitly, by a normative claim: "It's wrong to kill innocents" and "It's wrong to cheat" are examples used in the literature (Pleasants 2009; 2015; Johnson 2019). Probably, everybody would also agree that it is wrong to enslave people. Cora Diamond even goes as far as to claim that there is nothing else to think here beyond the thought that "slavery is unjust and insupportable" (Diamond 2019).[1] All these statements seem to be undoubtable and, in virtue of this, morally certain, providing morality with a binding character. But what is the nature of a certainty in morality, and what's the relation between it and moral truth? What are the criteria that qualify a proposition as certain in morality? And if moral debates are fundamentally structured by certainties, don't they simply justify the moral status quo?

In this paper we explore the scope and plausibility of Diamond's (2019) idea of "thinking guides" in practical reasoning. The metaphor refers to signposts in moral thinking that guide moral thought. The proposition "Slavery is unjust and insupportable" is a case in point. Diamond understands such propositions as non-bipolar because thinking their opposite results in nothing but nonsense.[2] In this sense, she suggests, the propositions are certain. By putting the example of slavery in dialogue with current debates in Wittgensteinian ethics on "basic moral certainties", we will show, however, that Diamond's criteria for solo propositions don't apply to it (Pleasants 2015; Johnson 2019; Kusch 2022; Hermann 2015).

We agree with others on the importance of certainties as a fundamental feature of language use that structures moral reasoning: certainties are needed to make morality work. Nevertheless, we depart from familiar positions presented in the literature in an important respect: whereas those advancing those positions take certainties to have a propositional structure and content, we argue that present talk about certainties in morals does not reflect, or demonstrate, the transcendental nature of these certainties. This transcendental nature can be described as rule-like, since certainties in morals do not contain content but instead structure and guide thinking and conduct. We will show that the certainties discussed in the literature have a bipolar structure, while the complementary TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES provide an a-rational foundation in thought, implying that ethical reflection has an a-rational basis, or foundation.

Our solution to the problem is the following. We will distinguish between two types of certainties in morals: TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS. We take TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES as rules

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1 Here Diamond is echoing David Wiggins (1990, 70), who similarly contends "that there is *nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable".

2 "Opposite" refers in this context to the negation of a given proposition. For example, if you say a cake is tasty and I say the opposite, I say it isn't tasty (so P and not-P are opposites). As we will show in this paper, some propositions don't have this bipolar structure.

containing no content. They are therefore not propositions in the narrow sense and take the logical form exhibited by "equals are to be treated equally". These certainties structure moral thought and action fundamentally, and thus they are transcendental in the sense that they make our usage of moral language work. As "proper" certainties, they are undoubtable rules of thought, and they do not convey any propositional content, or thought, as, in contrast, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS do. As we will show, the subject matter of CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS ranges across plausible objects of doubt, like "killing is wrong".

We will further show the importance of "thinking guides" in practical reasoning. Thinking guides in morals have an intelligible counterpart, and the content described by that counterpart is morally repugnant. Diamond, for example, discusses the wrongness of having property in humans, i.e. slavery. In her argument, slavery serves as an example of the way a proposition can qualify as being *quasi*-undoubtable.

We will proceed as follows. In Section I, we outline and discuss Diamond's work on thinking guides in ethics. In Section II, we introduce "basic moral certainties", as discussed in Wittgensteinian ethics. We refine the notions of certainties in morals in Section III, using the distinction between TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS highlighted above, and in this section we also contrast our findings with Diamond's idea of thinking guides. In Section IV, we sum up the results and map them in a broader context.

I. Cora Diamond and Thinking Guides in Morality

In her book *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics* Diamond develops—in several essays, and in dialogue with the philosophies of David Wiggins, Bernard Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. M. Anscombe—the idea of "thinking guides" as tools enabling us to think well in our practical reasoning. In brief, good practical thought is navigated by such thinking guides and goes astray when one thinks against them. Diamond (2019) describes thinking guides as containing "path-blockers" and "path-indicators"—that is, "either blockers of false paths or indications of open and useful ones" (233). Their function is quite straightforward: "In a variety of different sorts of cases, the structure of thought and debate may involve propositions the role of which it is to block paths of thought, or to indicate their availability and significance" (233). Thinking guides are thus useful tools in our endeavor to think well. This is particularly interesting as it takes seriously the idea that moral thinking is vulnerable to going wrong.

Thinking guides play a regulative role in practical reasoning by directing practical reasoning or by helping to put thinking that has gone astray back on track. As Diamond (2019, 67) contends:

> we may stand in need of, or find useful, many different sorts of path-indicators, both of the kind that block paths of thought we may be tempted to take, and also of the kind that indicate open paths of thought which

it may be important for us to be aware of, but which habits of ease-in-thinking make invisible to us, or enable us to go on not seeing.

How, and from what premises, does Diamond derive this statement? When discussing statements that lack the bipolarity of a senseful proposition—such as Anscombe's example "'someone' is not the name of someone"[3]—Diamond (2019) emphasizes that there is no possibility of them being false, since their opposition "is mere muddle" (203),[4] that stating the opposite, "when examined, peters out into nothingness" (204). Following Wittgenstein's *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Diamond characterizes such statements, which include "I am not dead", as "preparatory" to engagement in language (208; Wittgenstein 1976). The role of preparatory uses of language is, according to Diamond (2019), "enabling other types of uses of propositions" (264) such as "I am not dead" or inequalities such as "$2 \times 24 \neq 46$" (259). So, they are required to make language meaningful, and by the same token they are, in a very practical sense, "useful", as they can "bring someone out of confusion and back into engaged life" (219). Accordingly, preparatory uses of language set out paths that are open for thinking and block others that are not open in that way. The main characteristic of preparatory uses of language is that they are *non-bipolar*. They provide a undoubtable foundation for thinking, and they are in a sense *certain*, because negating them is nonsense. What, other than nonsense, would it be if I were to claim that I'm dead? Or that $2 + 2 = 5$? These statements are certain, not in the sense that they are universally true, but in the sense that doubt about them isn't graspable—entertaining such doubt is something one cannot successfully do. In other words, they are certain in a pragmatic, practical sense.

Accordingly, non-bipolar statements or "solo propositions", as Diamond (2019) also calls them, are not "just there". They play a central role in our lives because they have proven useful. In fact, many statements of the kind are "indications of thought that has *gone astray*; and thought can indeed *go astray* in various ways" (225). What does this entail for morality? Following Wiggins, Diamond illuminates the importance of solo propositions in moral thought by equating the statement that "slavery is unjust and insupportable" with "$7 + 5 = 12$". In these cases, she suggests, there is *nothing* to be thought other than that *slavery is unjust and insupportable* and that *7 + 5 = 12* (232). Diamond is aware that the statement about slavery differs from the proposition "I am not dead", and indeed from a mathematical equation, because in the case of slavery the opposite is intelligible, but she stresses that in this case the thinkable *should not* be an alternative.

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3 For Diamond's discussion of this example of Anscombe's, see Diamond (2019, 251–270).
4 Other Wittgensteinians tend to use the notion of "nonsense" instead: See Glock (1996, 263–264) for a discussion of Wittgenstein and his remarks on nonsense and bipolarity.

But is this statement about slavery genuinely non-bipolar? Where the injustice of slavery is concerned, there is an intelligible opposite, i.e. pro-slavery advocacy, that should still be avoided: perceiving other humans as property. For "in going down that path, one's thinking may have *gone astray as thinking*" (Diamond 2019, 263). However, here, things must be clarified. We agree with Diamond that solo propositions, in their non-bipolar nature, are important, as they make language use *in general* meaningful. They serve as a foundation by providing language with a binding character. But we also think that Diamond's slavery example doesn't qualify as a solo proposition. Slavery is certainly callous and repugnant, and at the very least undesirable, but its counterpart is intelligible and imaginable. To be clear, we have no wish to defend slavery. Our aim is to highlight that talk about justifying slavery—in any of its modern or ancient forms—is intuitively and rightly understood as thinking. It should be conceived of as thinking that has "gone astray as thinking". Let us explain that in more detail, drawing further on Diamond's material.

Diamond takes the dispute between pro- and anti-slavery thinkers in the American South to show that a certain path of thought does not prove to be morally conservative, that is, merely relative to people who have the same moral vocabulary. To put the point another way: although the opposite of the statement that "slavery is unjust and insupportable" is intelligible, it is an invitation to wander on pernicious paths and should be avoided *irrespective of your own moral vocabulary of evaluation*. This latter statement is not relative to a society or community.

Diamond underlines this connection by referring to the fact that most pro-slavery thinkers did share the same moral vocabulary as their opponents: even if they were insisting that slavery in the American South was profitable, they were, as Diamond (2019, 273) notws, not necessarily disagreeing that having property in other human beings is unjust: "The main point here, then, is that, in various ways, people may *turn off* the issue of the application to themselves (or to particular others) of some concept that they do use in an ordinary way in other circumstances" (275). Applied to the example of slavery, this means: to hold that slavery is "not really" unjust is a deflection of what is morally shared and perceived as morally salient in a very ordinary sense—and in the end it is a corrupt and self-deceiving thought because one might be at risk of losing meaningful application of justice altogether by advocating slavery. What is pernicious and heinous in the case of slavery is not the lack of the concept of justice in pro-slavery advocacy, but to engage in the concept of property in human beings—a concept that should actually leave you "with nothing to think but that it is odious, unjust, an intolerable evil" (277). In fact, if you think of "slavery not being unjust und insupportable, you are at risk of depriving yourself of the possibility of putting together a workable system of moral ideas" (283; Wiggins 1990, 70–71).

As mentioned above, Diamond (2019) holds that certain path-indicators and -blockers are useful and important because they work. In the moral realm they also correspond to human well-being. So, they serve as tools to think

well about moral matters: "Once you've got justice and respect for humanity on board, you've got […] considerations that will lead to recognition of the evil of slavery" (285). Justice and respect for humanity were also available to pro-slavery advocates, as these concepts pave common ground and render some intelligible thought as "off rails" in the first place. As a result, metaphorically speaking, a sign was put up, with the "statement that men are by nature equal, or the statement that all men are created equal" (287), warning us not to take that heinous path. So, arguments presented in anti-slavery thought are meant to guide thinking, and especially to guide conceptions such as justice, away from ideas, such as that of natural slavery, whose content makes it seem plausible that property in human beings is ethically sound. So, what makes this proposition *quasi*-non-bipolar is its function as a "regress stopper" (Sayre-McCord 1996) in that it serves as a final moral demarcation line which provides a moral foundation for further moral thought and conduct. Considering their strong plausibility, Diamond ascribes to such signposts a proof-like character by drawing on Wiggins and what he says about mathematical proofs in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wiggins (1987, 128) focuses on

> Wittgenstein's extended description of how a continuing cumulative process of making or constructing can amount to the creation of a shared form of life that is constitutive of rationality itself, furnishing proofs that are not compulsions but procedures to guide our conceptions, explaining, without explaining away, our sense that sometimes we have no alternative but to infer this from that.

Although the statement "slavery is unjust and insupportable" differs from mathematical propositions because the latter allow for no intelligible counterpart, path-blockers like it serve as tools that guide our concepts. Furthermore, they form, as Diamond (2019) notes, a "cumulative process […] through which we construct a form of life, including how we understand what is and isn't rational" (301). Thought has a teleological structure according to Diamond, and what is shaped by that teleology is shaped by us. This shaping can succeed or fail: "Losing hold of justice, as pro-slavery thought did, was shaping thought badly" (305). Further, statements like "slavery is unjust and insupportable" shape what we take to be rational thinking and show a way where thought needs to go. This process draws on concepts we already possess like justice, cruelty, guilt and so forth.

Compare how fine-grained and subtle Diamond's critique of slavery is by contrast with Nigel Pleasants' coarse and relativistic depiction of it. Pleasants (2010, 168) writes:

[I]f an institutionalized practice is necessary for a people to sustain a decent way of life, then even though it inflicts suffering or death on the individuals whom it exploits, those people should not be blamed for not thinking it unjust.

Diamond walks on a less dangerous path: she highlights that concepts like justice that would have provided proper critique of the institution of slavery were always at hand,[5] because the fact that it was a profitable economic endeavor wouldn't have justified it as morally unproblematic or just. Surely, Pleasants isn't seeking to justify slavery—but he criticizes it on grounds very different from those indicated by Diamond.

What's interesting for our discussion is the following: thinking guides, with their characteristic of being proof-like or *quasi*-non-bipolar, can be framed as being certain in morality. And path-indicators and -blockers form rational thought. Rationality, here, turns out to be communicative rationality, as thinking guides seem to direct moral thinking. This gives important insights into the relation of language and thinking, because modes of moral thinking and judgment, and likewise our beliefs, rest on some common but rationally graspable ground.

This ground could be described as consisting of certainties in morals: it consists of non-bipolar propositions that are not questionable and, in that respect, certain. But do thinking guides in morality qualify as such? We have already doubted that. To answer this question fully, however, we will examine "basic moral certainties" as they are discussed in "ethics in the wake of Wittgenstein",[6] and ask how they must be refined.

II. Certainties in Moral Thinking and Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein

"Basic moral certainties" have been discussed at length by Pleasants (2008; 2009; 2015). They have also recently been examined by Julia Hermann (2015), Jeremy Johnson (2019) (who denotes a basic moral certainty as a "bedrock principle") and Martin Kusch (2021; 2022), who develop their arguments by drawing on Wittgenstein's discussion of epistemic certainty in *On Certainty* (1975).[7] Examples of such certainties in the literature are "Killing is wrong" (Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015), "Death is bad" (Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015) and "Cheating is wrong" (Johnson 2019). Before discussing the problems set by these examples, we propose a terminological clarification regarding "basic moral certainty": "basic" can be omitted, we think, as a certainty is always basic. Further, "moral

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5 Think of the Roman Stoics, who argued against natural slaves on the basis that all human beings form a community of rational beings. The slave-master relationship was perceived by the Stoics as unjust and supported by mere conventions (Annas 2011, 58–64).
6 We borrow this terminology from Benjamin De Mesel's and Oskari Kuusela's (2019) essay collection *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*. The title refers to approaches in moral philosophy that are not strictly exegetical of Wittgenstein's work but try to flesh out what his later philosophy tells us about ethics.
7 Pleasant's work in particular attracted critical responses. See, for example, Rummens (2013), Laves (2020) and Ariso (2022).

certainty" must be describable as an object with a truth-value. In what follows we reject that all certainties in morals have a subject matter that can be either true or false. As we will show, "proper" certainties in morals do not have content but are rules. Hence, we will talk about *certainties in morals* in this paper. For the examples provided in the literature, including those cited above, we suggest (with the support of argumentation provided below) the term CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS.

The problem with the literature's examples is the following: owing to their propositional structure, they describe content and are thus compatible with thinkable deviations. Oppositions are imaginable, and they therefore rest on intelligible grounds—e.g. even if the situation is unfortunate, as it is in the case of mercy killing, reasons can be given for the assertion that killing is right. The examples therefore fail to satisfy the criterion imposed by the authors themselves, i.e. that the negation of certainties in morals must be unthinkable. We will argue that a "proper" certainty in morals has the feature of being transcendental, i.e. that thinking the opposite "peters out into nothingness", as Diamond puts it, following Anscombe, and as Pleasants, Hermann and Johnson also claim. Hence, the impossibility of negating a certainty is a shared feature that is argued for but has been insufficiently scrutinized. Only recently, Kusch highlighted that different types of certainties exist (Kusch 2021; 2022; Deininger et al. 2022).

Johnson (2019) pictures certainties as the background against which, and the foundation upon which, meaningful claims can be made. They are not "grounds" for belief. They are "the ground" for belief (211). While some moral statements can be open to discussion, certainties in the moral sphere turn out *not* to be questionable; they are socially rooted (Kober 1997) and resist moral skepticism (Rummens 2013), so it is justifiable to hold that our attitude toward them is one of "basic certainty" (Moyal-Sharrock 2005). Therefore, certainties in moral thinking are "immune to justification, challenge and doubt, and hence cannot be objects of first-personal knowledge" (Pleasants 2015, 197), because what "is truly foundational is something which nothing imaginable would speak against" (Johnson, 213). These foundations are manifest, not in shared opinions, but in shared judgement, as Wittgenstein (2009, §§ 241–242) puts it. To illustrate the idea of certainty-ruling judgments, we offer the equation "$2 + 2 = 4$". Certainty, in this case, does not lie within "4", but in the move from "$2 + 2$" to "4", a rule that is followed blindly (Wittgenstein 2009, § 219).

According to Pleasants (2015, 199–200), the "badness of death", the "wrongness of killing" and the "wrongness of unwarranted infliction of pain" and other forms of suffering are "basic moral certainties" which function as moral foundations for further moral thought and conduct:

> A basic certainty is something that cannot be sensefully asserted, explained, justified, questioned, or denied first-personally; and indeed no-one would even think of doing so outside a philosophical debate on

the phenomenon. That it is very wrong to kill an innocent and non-threatening person, absent special excusing or justifying circumstances, is so fundamental to our human form of life and individual moral consciousness as to be recalcitrant to propositional formulation. (200)

In other words: certainties in moral thought are, like Diamond's thinking guides, non-bipolar statements. Accordingly, they have the function of regress stoppers, and through that function they show that morality has an ultimately binding character. There is a ground that prevents further discussion or deliberation, as going further would be to move outside any intelligible debate. To utter something outside the system of certainties is not irrational. It's a-rational. At the same time, it is not up to us to accept the binding character of certainties—a functional moral system is possible only, and precisely, because we rely on certainties and their function as regress stoppers. In the words of Wittgenstein (2009, § 217): "Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"

According to Pleasants (2015), there is a parallel here with moral norms. It seems certain to us that we do not kill a person without weighty reasons, and that it is something akin to tragedy if somebody is killed in an act of self-defense—this is simply how we, as a moral community, think and act. A person who thinks killing fellow humans is perfectly fine in any circumstances would justifiably be regarded as alien, as they are not participating in the same form of life that is expressed in our shared moral beliefs (i.e. intelligible possibilities to think with) which themselves rest on a bedrock consisting of certainties in morality.

But: certainties are not universal truths; they are fundamental if morality is to work, and they give it a binding character—they, according to Wittgenstein (1975, § 204) show in practice, not in reflection:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.

As certainties in moral thought are foundational to our language use, Johnson (2019) ascribes a form of "heterogeneous foundationalism" to Wittgenstein. This foundationalism is not to be understood as a substantialist theory. It "merely describes features of the conceptual scheme we inherit and learn—our foundation. If we did not adapt this scheme, language-games involving truth claims and attempts of justification would not be possible" (203). To work, moral thinking in particular, and thinking as such, must have certainties:

These are not claims that might turn out to be wrong. They are the background against which and the foundation upon which meaningful claims can be made which might turn out to be wrong. *They are not grounds for belief, they are the ground for belief.* (211)

Certainties are therefore non-bipolar statements or solo propositions. As Diamond (2019, 222–223) notes, this is the most crucial insight of Wittgenstein's in *On Certainty*:

> There are, that is, propositions that are not members of pairs of propositions, such that both members of the pair have the possibility of being true *and the possibility of being false*. In the case of these propositions, the possibility of their being false is ruled out. And in this sense, one could say, such propositions are not bipolar.

This parallels precisely what Johnson develops in his heterogenous foundationalism and what we take as "proper" moral certainties: TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALS. Certain moral statements are, like mathematical equations, asymmetrical because their opposite is not available to thought. Examples of certainties in the moral sphere must be measured against this criterion. So, the foundations of how we think morally, and act morally, rest upon a bedrock.

III. Refining Certainties in Morals: What's the Role of Thinking Guides?

To summarize the argument up to this point, we agree with Johnson and Pleasants that moral thinking eventually rests on common ground that cannot be disputed, and that certainties function as regress stoppers (as is reflected in the thesis of non-bipolar propositions in heterogenous foundationalism introduced by Johnson [2019]). What the authors denote as "basic moral certainties" are rules of thought in morality and moral judgment—but the authors' suggestions that "Killing is wrong" (Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015), "Death is bad" (Pleasants 2008; 2009; 2015) and "Cheating is wrong" (Johnson 2019) can be identified, or categorized, as certainties cannot be correct. As Kusch (2022) argues, Pleasants fails to appreciate the variety among moral certainties—and this criticism applies to Johnson and Hermann as well. Siding with Kusch here, we claim that the notion of basic moral certainties needs refinement. We will thus argue that "proper" certainties in morals do not contain content. Instead, they describe forms of rational thought. Hence, "proper" certainties describe permissible and impermissible moves that tacitly structure meaningful language use, and subsequently moral deliberation, as Johnson (2019, 212–213) likewise notes. To see this, take the example developed by Deininger et al. (2022) of equal consideration being given to all when pain is inflicted on another:

P1: The intentional infliction of pain on a human individual capable of experiencing pain is morally significant.

P2: Some non-human animals are similarly capable of experiencing pain.

C: The intentional infliction of pain on such non-human animals is morally significant.

This sets out a convincing line of thought. Consider how strange it would be to claim that this is not warranted, as a form of practical thinking, since a further premise, P3, is missing:

P3: Equals are to be treated equally and unequals unequally.

We cannot but think in accordance with this rule. To make P3 explicit is redundant in everyday language use: it adds nothing and not mentioning it does not make the reasoning invalid. In this sense, P3 is like a "pseudo-premise" (Johnson 2019, 212). It can be skipped when one is presenting the argument without loss. Such premises are not in need of explication in everyday language use, because they are not plausible objects of doubt or justification.

This becomes palpable in connection with actual, practical reasoning and the legitimate moves made in moral thought that can only be avoided at the cost of irrationality. For instance, in the animal context: if we take the capacity to experience pain morally seriously in humans and then find comparable capacities in animals, it's superfluous to explicate the claim that comparable pain should count equally: equals are to be treated equally, *period*. However, as this example also indicates, without a habituated practice of following the certainty, the application of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES becomes futile.

We deviate from accounts of certainty in the moral realm in the literature in using the term TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY IN MORALS for what we describe here. The examples provided in the literature, discussed in Section II, involve propositions that *seem* to be certain, but their subject matter can nonetheless be doubted and therefore they do not satisfy the criterion of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY conceived as something constituted by undoubtable rules of thought. They are, as we will show, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS. For example, although Pleasants introduces the example "Killing is wrong" to illustrate unquestionable (in our words, *transcendental*) certainty, this example contains *propositional* content and can therefore be reasonably doubted. The arguments relating to each deviation very probably won't satisfy everybody, but they are intelligible and certainly not a-rational or nonsensical. Pleasants and Johnson are also wrong that their propositions are not justifiable, although it does seem that, for psychological reasons, the propositions *seem* to be immunized. As Kusch (2022) notes, Pleasants' "basic moral certainties" might be immunized against questioning and doubt, but this doesn't prevent them from being reflected upon or doubted.

The violation of a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY, by contrast, is thinking that goes off track, thinking that is neither rational nor irrational but *a-rational*. Consider someone insisting that $2 + 2 = 5$. We would reject that

utterance and the accompanied thinking as muddled. We cannot encounter it intelligibly. In this sense, TRANSCEN-DENTAL CERTAINTIES resemble logical axioms. Violating them has unintelligible results, unlike the violation of a CERTAIN PROPOSITION, which can be rational or irrational, in the sense given by the idea of being right or wrong about something. Otherwise, we would find ourselves in a completely different framework (or "form of life" to put it in Wittgensteinian terms) to which we have no intelligible access. Similarly, we would accuse somebody of being morally confused and unjust if they insisted that a pair of similar crimes causing equal amounts of harm should be punished unequally by the courts—just think of a celebrity who merely pays a fine for tax evasion while somebody else, less celebrated as a public figure, faces prison for the same crime. This has been substantiated in the tenet "equal treatment of individuals at court" and is echoed by a fundamental principle of liberal societies: people are not to be treated unequally by law or governmental authority.

So, TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES are not, in a sense, related to objects. They enable and delineate the forms of thought that relate to objects. This gives the notion of a basic certainty in morality a major twist that has not been described in the literature: it is not moral subject matter (like that conveyed by the precept "Killing is wrong") that is certain. Instead, we must focus on the certainty experienced by a person as a consequence of following a rule of thought. In other words, it is the lived following of the rule that incorporates certainty, and not a particular belief or proposition, because certainties are located in the blind following of rules rather than in belief in propositions. We cannot but think with the rules "Equals are to be treated equally and unequals unequally" and "$2 + 2 = 4$".[8] We might make mistakes or introduce exemptions, but when the making of the mistakes or introduction of exceptions is made explicit, the implicit transcendental character of these certainties also becomes explicit—as the rule that has been, and has to be, followed (blindly). So, certainty lies in tacitly following rules of thought and is not its result (Wittgenstein 2009, § 241). Equally, however, TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES must be meaningfully applied. If we say that animal and human sentience are to be considered equally, as must people involved in tax evasion, we value a certain shared characteristic as something that is equally important across the board, despite all the differences between human and non-human animals, or between humans and humans. So, the fundamental question that remains is "whether the cases that we see as 'like' *should* be taken within moral thinking to be significantly alike" (Diamond 2018, 395).

Following that, we conclude that Pleasants' and Johnson's examples, mentioned above, are CERTAIN PROPO-SITIONS. Usually, it is wrong to kill or to cheat. A community relies on such CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS to make morality work—but it also strives on discussing and disputing possible exceptions. Assisted suicide, for example,

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8 We are not ruling out the possibility that there are further TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES. However, they must qualify as rules in the way we have explained.

was under debate in Austria at the time at which this manuscript was written. It can be rationally argued for or against, potentially—depending on the perspective taken—with the result that killing is not wrong, but good, or even a positive duty, *in certain circumstances*.

When it comes to the badness of death, things become even more complicated. Is death really bad for a person? Isn't it what gives our lives meaning in comparison with endless life? Kusch (2021, 1098–1099) argues, in the light of such questions, that the proposition that death is bad could be discussed as a religious certainty, i.e. a certainty "tied to a 'stance' and supported primarily by stance-internal evidence". If I was a Buddhist, death wouldn't be bad for me (or, from my perspective, others) at all—suffering would be. Hence, the idea that "Death is bad" qualifies as TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY can also be challenged.

To sum up, we take TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES as rules containing no content. They are therefore not propositions and lack the logical form of, say, "equals are to be treated equally". These certainties structure moral thought and action fundamentally. Thus they are transcendental in the sense that they are a precondition of moral language use so much as working. As "proper" certainties, they are undoubtable rules of thought, and they do not convey any propositional content or thought (as, by contrast, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS do). In brief: whereas TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALS have no subject matter, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS have; whereas TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES cannot be doubted except at the cost of nonsense, the subject matter of CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS is plausible objects of doubt. When we deviate from CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS, our thinking is still rational, but we might have reason not to share the outcome; when we deviate from TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES, thinking itself goes astray.

Now, let us bring these results to bear on Diamond's thinking guides: Do the thinking guides qualify as TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES or as CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS? One can readily identify factors explaining why slavery is unjust and insupportable. The notion that slavery is unjust can be justified with reference to very good reasons. However, the criterion for a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY IN MORALS is, among other things, that it cannot be justified or even (as Pleasants says) sensefully asserted. This is obviously not the case with slavery. But is the signpost "Slavery if unjust and insupportable" merely a CERTAIN PROPOSITION, then? What seems to be peculiar about the proposition "Slavery is unjust and insupportable", in comparison with "Killing is wrong", is that its content is more precise and fine-grained. If slavery is understood as having property in human beings, it is, by definition, wrong—this is reflected in basic human rights. And these rights, even if they are insufficiently respected in many areas of the world, resulted from a cumulative process that correlates with a long history of anti-slavery thinking, ranging from the Stoics to Kant's Formula of Humanity, and on to the current critique of modern slavery (Kusch, 2022). Thus thinking guides "are associated with a persuasive backstory; and their having such a

connection is tied to the kind of use they are meant to have" (Diamond 2019, 260; Wiggins 1990, 66–72; 80–81). There is a long story rendering slavery irrational and immoral *but* not a-rational.[9] Hence, Diamond's examples of thinking guides do not qualify as solo propositions, and thus they do not qualify as TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES.

What makes thinking guides, in Diamond's sense, so plausible is their more precisely defined content—content that is more specific than that in the examples provided by Pleasants and Johnson. But they still have a bipolar structure. So, if one were inclined to frame thinking guides as *quasi-transcendental* in virtue of their plausibility, we would reject that contention, albeit with the concession that they can still be ascribed a particular role in moral thinking because they can be characterized as *quasi*-undoubtable.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to show that there are two types of certainties in morals: TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS. The two types of certainties play similar but different roles in moral thinking. The former are undoubtable. Negating them is not irrational but a-rational. The latter, such as Diamond's statement about slavery, have an intelligible counterpart that may turn out to be irrational. Still, the plausibility of signposts in thinking is so strong that they structure moral thought with respect to content in a way that is reminiscent of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES—they are in this sense *quasi*-undoubtable. Defending slavery is off the rails. It is intelligible but callous. Something similar might be said about nuclear warfare, as is clear from the following remarks of Noam Chomsky's (2022) in an interview conducted in the context of the war in Ukraine: "Nuclear warfare had better become taboo talk, and unthinkable policy. […] All steps should be taken to remove the scourge of nuclear weapons from the earth, before they destroy all of us". Whereas Chomsky seems to reject nuclear warfare on the basis of our very own self-interest to survive as individuals and as a species, drawing on our knowledge of just how destructive nuclear weapons are, Anscombe (1981, 66) understands such warfare as murder: "Choosing to kill the innocent as a means to your ends is always murder".[10] Either way, nuclear warfare is framed as a disastrous, cruel and unjust means of war. Although deviation from these statements seems to result in intelligible propositions, it could be said that the statements accumulate to form a signpost that can be framed as a blocker for a path which is better left untrodden.

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9 We think that this is in line with statements made by Wittgenstein in his Cambridge lectures from 1930–1933. G. E. Moore (2013, 315) reports Wittgenstein in the following way: when it comes to ethics, reasons can alter one's way of thinking about certain things. These reasons, however, are not the end of discussion.

10 Anscombe addressed this statement to Convocation in Oxford in the course of a meeting discussing granting the US president Harry S. Truman an honorary degree. Truman was the US president when the decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was made.

Still, thinking guides (and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS) rest on TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES: the former belong to the "riverbed" of certainty, whereas the latter build the "bedrock" (Johnson 2019). However, one might feel inclined to claim that the approach to certainties developed here underlies or reflects a kind of moral conservatism, since it involves advocating that morality has an ultimately binding character. When it comes to our dealings with animals, for example, Wittgensteinians such as Diamond are often accused of taking an approach to morality that is merely reconstructive and thus morally conservative (Aaltola 2012, 139; McMahan 2005).

Is this really the case, though? Remember the example of animal sentience, fleshing out the TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY "Equals must be treated equally and unequals unequally". On the basis of this TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY, we concluded that the intentional infliction of pain on non-human animals is morally significant. In the animal ethics context, this certainty has been famously substantiated by Singer's (1976) claim that "all animals are equal", which he subsumes under the principle of the equal consideration of equal interests—a principle whose essence is "that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions" (2011, 20). Accordingly, this principle states that "an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be" (2011, 20), regardless of its bearer being a human or non-human animal. So, Singer obviously follows the TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY that we have identified. Moreover, as he advocates radical changes to the way in which animals are treated, across many areas in which we interact with non-human animals, Singer (2009) is very far from being conservationist of the status quo.

Singer substantiates a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY that bottoms out moral thinking, but the risk he takes in doing so is that of being reductionistic: his theory is arguably reductionistic, since it attempts to reduce complex human-animal relationships to a theory that requires as few principles as possible. This is particularly evident in Singer's utilitarianism, which reduces morality to the simple principle of fulfilling interests (Monsó and Grimm (2019, 12–13). The approach presented here avoids problematic reductionism of this sort and, at the same time, enables moral change. Singer is right in pointing to the fact that animals and humans share interests and are equals in this respect, but he also misses the point that his principle is the substantiation of a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY: certainties of this kind don't have content; they are rules. Thus, it's correct to point to the similarities in humans and animals but wrong to reduce reality to principles in the way Singer does. Singer is indicating a way of thinking that makes moral arguments plausible and rational, but at the same time he takes his criteria for equality to be transcendental. The TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY "Equals are to be treated equally and unequals unequally" facilitates his argument and provides it with plausibility. So, although TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALS have the function of opening up possibilities for thinking, what is at stake in moral progress, or change, should be discussed at the level of content.

CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS are, of course, open to debate, as they always convey content. For example, "killing" is quite a broad notion. Unjustified killing is murder, and murder cannot be anything other than wrong—this is inherent to the concept of murder, since murder simply is unjustified killing. But justified killing might be framed as euthanasia. Surely, it is not always clear whether some course of action qualifies as murder or euthanasia. Slaughter of farm animals might be justified by its utility in providing food, but certain slaughter practices could be described as murderous (Crary 2021). The putting down of the family dog can sometimes be framed as murder. That might be appropriate, for example, if the dog is put down while still having some (arguably, diminished) quality of life as a result of no longer being unable to go for mountain walks. So, content in moral certainties—i.e. in CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS or in the substantiations of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES—is fundamentally open to discussion and reflection. Accordingly, certainties aren't necessarily conservative of the status quo. They do not necessarily render established practices and beliefs unproblematic. Quite the contrary, in fact, they make moral criticism and change possible in the first place.

In conclusion, in our discussion of moral certainties, we hope to have provided insights that will enrich debates in practical rationality and moral conservatism—the latter often being referenced in critiques of Wittgensteinian approaches to ethics. Taking practice, and what forms it, seriously shows that an approach to certainties in the moral sphere needn't be morally conservative, as it can acknowledge that moral communities face moral disagreement. At the same time, morality has an ultimately binding character, since is fundamentally structured by TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES. Our discussion of thinking guides has also explained that moral thinking and conduct are shaped by a cumulative process that is not mystical but, rather, rationally approachable. They have a convincing background story and are thus open to scrutiny.

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