This is the penultimate draft

Analysing holocaust survivor testimony

Certainties, scepticism, relativism

Martin **Kusch**

Introduction

To date philosophical reflections on the Holocaust and Holocaust survivor testimony have come almost exclusively from authors in the so-called Continental tradition: Giorgio Agamben 1998, Jacques Derrida 2005 or Jean-François Lyotard 1983, to name but the most influential. This chapter is an attempt to contribute to the scholarship on Holocaust survivor testimony using some of the concepts and conceptions of 'analytic philosophy', more precisely, some of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (1969). I shall use these remarks to analyse the 'linguistic despair' expressed by many Holocaust survivors when trying to put their horrendous experiences into words. I shall also address the question how we might think of the relationship between the various – often fiercely opposed – theoretical approaches to Holocaust testimony. Here too I shall rely on some of Wittgenstein's ideas.

This chapter has four main sections. I shall begin with an overview of my interpretation of Wittgenstein's 'hinge epistemology'. (The name derives from the fact that Wittgenstein compares our certainties to 'hinges' that 'must stay put' if we want our investigations to proceed, that is if we 'want the door to turn'. [1969, §343].) I shall pay particular attention to different types of 'certainties'; to how these certainties figure in 'epistemic systems'; and to what role certainties

play in arguments over scepticism and relativism. Subsequently I shall introduce the two issues concerning Holocaust survivor testimony that I wish to analyse: linguistic despair and the multitude of approaches. The rest of the chapter uses hinge epistemology to analyse Holocaust survivor testimony. This will also involve a further development of Wittgenstein's ideas, especially the introduction of *moral* certainties.

On certainty

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* consists of notebook entries written between 1949 and 1951. It was first published in 1969. *On Certainty* describes as its central interest 'certainties', that is 'cases in which I rightly say I cannot be making a mistake'. And the passage continues: 'I can enumerate various typical cases, but not give any common characteristic' (§674). Certainties have a special position in our belief systems. In §102 we are told that our beliefs 'form a system'. In §141 we learn that when we begin to believe 'what we believe is not a single proposition' but 'a whole system of propositions'. And in §144 *On Certainty* proposes a new conception of the structure of our beliefs: some 'sentences (or beliefs) of the form of empirical judgments (or beliefs)' (e.g. a certainty like 'My name is Martin Kusch') can in some contexts be as foundational as are judgments or beliefs about the meanings of words or mathematical beliefs. And not all beliefs about the meaning of words or mathematical propositions are as beyond doubt as are some 'sentences of the form of empirical judgments'.

One of Wittgenstein's central interests in *On Certainty* is to study different kinds of encounters between himself and people who (seem to) deny one of his certainties. In fact *On Certainty* collects material for a 'well-ordered synopsis' (*übersichtliche Darstellung*)

(Wittgenstein 2001, §122) of such encounters. The point of this well-ordered synopsis is to emphasize the variety of, and patterns in, our responses to such denials. There are about thirty scenarios in *On Certainty* that are cases in which Wittgenstein imagines someone else denying one of his certainties. Here I have to confine myself to a sketchy overview. In order to do this most economically, I need to introduce the idea of varying cultural distance between Wittgenstein and the certainty-denying people he imagines encountering. The coarse-grained categorization of distance Wittgenstein seems to work with can be captured in in the forms of concentric circles. The centre of the concentric circles is occupied by Wittgenstein himself. In the following rings around him, at increasing distance, are friends (e.g. G. E. Moore) in his own culture, strangers in his own culture and children. The remaining rings are people outside of Wittgenstein's culture. Ring *a* is for members of other cultures that Wittgenstein is willing to treat as *virtual members* of his own culture. The outmost ring *c* is for members of other cultures that are too distant to be counted as virtual members of Wittgenstein's own culture and that nevertheless are too intelligent to be dismissed. They are not properly appraisable. Finally, there are members of other cultures that have an ambiguous status (Ring *b*). Our interest is with the person in the centre. How does she respond to people at varying social-cultural distances that seem to deny what are certainties of various types for her?

I will now give examples of Wittgenstein's own responses. When a friend – e.g. Moore – straightforwardly denies a certainty then Wittgenstein is inclined to regard him as 'demented' or 'insane' (§71, 155). Wittgenstein treats other adult members of his own culture similarly to how he treats friends (§§217, 257). Children receive a more charitable treatment. In their case – at least regarding some categories of certainties – Wittgenstein is willing to offer arguments, explanations, criticism and education (§§310, 322).

Moving further outwards in the system of concentric circles (= *a*), Wittgenstein thinks that sometimes we are willing to dismiss member of other cultures as ignorant and as lacking in knowledge. Thus the tribesmen who in 1950 insist that someone has been to the moon – and who thereby deny one of our fundamental empirical-scientific beliefs – are 'people who do not know a lot that we know' (§286).

Note, however, that the situation changes in a context in which the tribesmen's statement belongs to the domains of religion or magic. Thus §92 introduces a king who has been told since childhood that 'the earth has only existed [...] since his own birth'. Wittgenstein likens the king's belief to magical beliefs about one's ability to make rain. This suggests to Elisabeth Anscombe (1976) that the king of §92 is best thought of as a religious leader such as the Dalai Lama. Wittgenstein imagines Moore trying to convince the king of Moore's certainty that the earth has existed since long before our birth. And he goes on: 'I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way' (§92). What is striking here is the absence of any 'they are wrong and we know it' (§286). This is confirmed by another passage in which someone like Dalai Lama is at issue again:

> 238. I might therefore interrogate someone who said that the earth did not exist before his birth, in order to find out which of my convictions he was at odds with. And then it *might* be that he was contradicting my fundamental attitudes, and if that were how it was, I should have to put up with it.

To 'put up with it' is to accept that *our categories of evaluation do not get a proper grip on this system or practice*.

Details aside, what kind and strength of relativism is discernible in *On Certainty*? The most important lesson of the above is, I take it, that Wittgenstein is not trying to defend or develop a global or comprehensive form of epistemic relativism. Instead, he is trying to sensitize us to the variety of our responses in the variety of cases in which our certainties are, or seem to be, denied by others. Sometimes our response is dismissal. Sometimes our response is education. But there is also a space for epistemic relativism in which the idea of non-appraisal looms large. Wittgenstein proposes that this form of epistemic relativism is at least permissible when encountering disagreements at the borderline between current science, on the one hand, and magic or religion, or fundamentally different conceptions of rationality, on the other hand. To give this form of relativism a name, I propose calling it a 'relativism of distance' – a term introduced by Bernard Williams in a different context (1981).

Whereas Wittgenstein thus leaves room for epistemic relativism in at least some contexts, he is very much opposed to epistemic *scepticism*. Wittgenstein formulates three problems for scepticism. The first is what I propose calling the 'problem of continuity': the sceptic needs to be able to show us that what she calls her 'sceptical' or 'philosophical doubt' is a sharpening of 'ordinary doubt'. Or, put differently, the sceptic needs to be able to make plausible that ordinary and radical-philosophical doubt are both species of some more general concept of DOUBT. And the same goes – *mutatis mutandis* – for error.

Wittgenstein thinks that scepticism fails the continuity test. I shall here focus only on the problem of continuity regarded 'error'. Wittgenstein makes a number of observations on ordinary error to bring out how different it is with respect to so-called radical sceptical error. Ordinary error is local within an epistemic system or language game (§56); it contrasts with unambiguous and familiar cases of non-error in the same general dimension (§56); it fits into a context of truths

(§74), shared with others (§156); it differs from false belief (§72) or mental disturbance (§§71, 75, 155); and, finally, an error (possibility) in our epistemic system is something that can be identified with the resources of our epistemic system (§74), and without that the level of safety/sensitivity is changed. Wittgenstein also claims that an error within our epistemic system is connected to a general strategy for controlling for such errors (§56). Radical sceptical error differs in all these respects. It is not an error within an epistemic system; it is an error of the epistemic system as a whole. It is not identifiable from within an epistemic system. Adopting it involves a radical change in epistemic position. And there is no clear strategy for avoiding it, other than abstaining from forming judgements altogether. Error needs a background of non-error – and that background is no longer clearly there in the case of radical scepticism. Wittgenstein concludes that radical-philosophical error is not continuous with our ordinary concepts of error. It is therefore not obvious that we understand the sceptic when he speaks of the need for radical doubt.

Wittgenstein's second problem for the sceptic concerns the link between epistemic and semantic scepticism (§§126, 306, 506). If, by fully general considerations, you raise the level of safety to the point where all our empirical beliefs become doubtful, then, to avoid inconsistency or double standards and conflict with the rule-following considerations, you have to do the same for semantic beliefs, that is for beliefs concerning what your words mean. And if you end up insisting that all our empirical beliefs might well be false together, then you must also insist that all our semantic beliefs might well be false together. But if you cannot rule out this possibility, how can you even assume that your sceptical position can be meaning-fully stated? (§§ 126, 306, 506)

Wittgenstein's third problem for external-world scepticism is that it inflates into global scepticism about everything. The argument goes like this. If – by fully general considerations – you raise the level of safety to the point where all our physical beliefs become doubtful, then, to avoid inconsistency or double standards, you have to do the same for all categories of belief. And then scepticism cannot be formulated: there is no category of entities (e.g. appearances) that can be interpreted in conflicting ways (cf. §§ 305, 328, 447).

Holocaust survivor testimony

By the term 'Holocaust survivor testimony' I mean the testimony of victims of the Holocaust broadly understood so as to include both the genocide of approximately six million Jews and the murder of five million non-Jewish people. A large number of such testimonies have been collected; by some counts more than 100,000 (Kushner 2006, 275). I shall first introduce the theme of 'linguistic despair' and then turn to different approaches to the Holocaust survivor testimony.

The theme of linguistic despair is so pervasive in the primary and secondary literature on Holocaust survivor testimony that I have to restrict myself to noting some striking and often-cited passages. Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel are the best-known commentators. Levi writes:

> Just as our hunger [in the concentration camp] cannot be compared with the hunger of someone who has skipped a meal, so also our way of freezing calls for another name. We [today] say 'hunger' and 'pain' and 'winter'. But all these are different phenomena [from those experienced in the camp]. Our words today are free words, used by free human beings, beings who experience joy and sorrow in their home. (Levi 1993, 123)

Wiesel describes the survivor testimonies as follows:

> Their sentences are terse, sharp, etched into stone. Every word contains a hundred, and the silence between the words strikes us as hard as the words themselves. They wrote not with words, but against them. They tried to communicate their experiences of the Holocaust, but all they communicated was their feeling of helplessness at not being able to communicate the experience. (Wiesel 1978, 198)

And elsewhere Wiesel speaks of his own struggle for words:

> I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger – thirst – fear – transport – selection – fire – chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. (Wiesel 2006, ix).

Another survivor, Charlotte Delbo, describes her difficulties in going back and forth between our and the Auschwitz meaning of 'thirst'. In the following passage she begins by noting that the survivor is forced to return from the concentration camp meaning to the ordinary meaning in order to make herself understood:

> Otherwise someone [who was in the camps] who has been tormented by thirst for weeks would never again be able to say: 'I'm thirsty. Let's make a cup of tea'. […] 'Thirst' [after the war] has once more become a currently used term. On the other hand, if I dream of the thirst that I felt in Birkenau, I see myself as I was then, haggard, bereft of reason, tottering. I feel again physically that real thirst, and it's an agonizing nightmare. But if you want me to speak to you about it. (translated in Langer 1991, 14; Delbo 1985, 11)

The psychologist Henry Greenspan comments that, in the written or oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, 'key terms should be in quotation marks – "murdered", "survival", "the aftermath" – to convey that their referents are radically unlike what we usually mean by "someone killing someone else", "living through and after", "the repercussions of an event now past" ' (Greenspan 1998, 7). Lawrence Langer, a leading scholar of Holocaust testimony in the field of literature, insists that, just as there was no common language between 'the Nazis and the Jews', so also there is no common language between the murdered and us (Langer 2000, 63). And Sidra Ezrahi, a scholar in comparative literature, notes:

> The fundamental anguish which is at the heart of all Holocaust literature is the
> challenge of generating words that can measure up to the enormity of the
> devastation, while the very voices which violate the silence after the destruction
> are signs of its antithesis – of remaining life and possible bridges to the future
> (Ezrahi 1980, 98).

The struggle for words is essentially the struggle to communicate the destruction of much of what in 'ordinary life' we take for granted. As Wiesel puts his fear of not being understood:

> Could men and women who consider it normal to assist the weak, to heal the sick,
> to protect small children, and to respect the wisdom of their elders understand
> what happened here? Would they be able to comprehend how, within that cursed
> universe, the masters tortured the weak and massacred the children, the sick, and
> the old? (2006, ix–x)

The writer and journalist Carolin Emcke analyses the experience of concentration camp prisoners as one in which 'the implicit background knowledge of a whole life-world falls apart, where all implicit certainties are once and for all blown away' (2013, 327). Jewish theologian Edith

Wyschogrod (1985) speaks of the distinction between our ordinary 'life world vocabulary' and its taken-for-granted certainties and the 'death world' in which ordinary language is replaced and overwritten. The word 'work' is no longer linked to the idea of making a living but used to denote a way of dying. 'Thirst' is no longer an irritation but a constant suffering. 'Death' is no longer a rarity but the central point of the inmates' social world. The writer K. Zetnik (or Yehiel De-Nur) uses the language of different planets instead of different worlds:

> This is actually the history of the Auschwitz planet. […] The time there is not a concept as it is here in our planet. […] And the inhabitants of that planet had no names. They breathed and lived according to different laws of Nature. They did not live according to the laws of this world of ours and they did not die. (quoted from Margalit 2002, 164)

The distance between the two worlds or planets also affects the choice of narrative plots for the testimony or the personal identity of the survivor. Greenspan stresses that survivors feel frustrated in their attempts to find a suitable narrative form for their reports; no plot familiar from the ordinary world feels adequate (Greenspan 1998). Langer touches on the same theme when he highlights 'the difficulty of narrating, from the context of normality now, the nature of the abnormality then, an abnormality that still surges into the present to remind us of its potent influence' (1991, 22).

The mentioned discontinuities have serious effects on the self, that is the identity of the narrating survivor. Delbo writes that 'the "self" who was in the camp isn't me, isn't the person who is here, opposite you. No, it's too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other 'self', the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, me, doesn't concern me' (Delbo 1985, 13, translated in Langer 1991, 5). Other authors have gone further and doubted whether there still

was a functioning self or 'I' in the 'death world'. This seems to be Wyschograd's view when she suggests that in order to act as a witness today the survivors 'must lose their loss of self' (Chare 2006, 58). This resonates with reflections of the psychiatrist Dori Laub who suggests that it is only in giving testimony that the survivor becomes an 'I' for the events he suffered (Laub 1992).

Finally, the various reflections on what I have called 'linguistic despair' are connected with the prominent – or perhaps notorious – theme of a certain 'unsayability' of the survivors' suffering during the Holocaust. It is easy to see how the connection is made: if the two worlds or planets use very different – perhaps incommensurable – languages, then it must be impossible to express events of the 'death world' using the language of the 'life world'.

I now turn to my second theme regarding Holocaust survivor testimony. This theme concerns the plethora of different research projects that have emerged around such testimony. A rough classification might take the following form (I here build on Browning 2003):

1. *Legal discourse*: This is the discourse of the courts. Here survivor testimony is used as evidence against perpetrators.

2. *Historical-factual discourse*: This category consists of the work of historians who employ survivor testimony primarily for one of two purposes: (i) to find out what actually happened or (ii) to illustrate the experiences of victims of the Holocaust.

3. *Identity discourse*: This research project analyses Holocaust testimony in an effort to comprehend how survivors have managed to form new identities in the post-Holocaust period (Jacobsen 1994).

4. *Psychoanalytic discourse*: This field of study analyses Holocaust survivor experiences with terms like 'trauma' or 'Holocaust syndrome'. The goal is to capture the emotional and cognitive difficulties of survivors in their lives in general and in their efforts to give testimony in particular (Auerhahn and Laub 1990).

5. *Messenger discourse*: Here the focus on the camp victim as a 'messenger from another world who alone can communicate the incommunicable' (Browning 2003, 38). The emphasis is less on the report of events than on the victims' experiences (Wiesel 1978).

6. *Incomprehensibility discourse*: Writers in this group of investigators oppose all attempts to find a positive message in the narratives of the survivors. Instead they highlight both the survivors' and our inability to come to intellectual terms with the Holocaust world (Langer 1991).

7. *Life history discourse*: Advocates of this approach conduct many interviews with the same survivor over several years. The purpose is to grasp how survivors struggle to find the right words and adequate narratives or similes for their experiences (Greenspan 1998).

8. *Triumph discourse*. This body of literature describes and celebrates the many successful lives of Holocaust survivors in the United States (Helmreich 1992).

9. *Generational discourse*. The aim here is to discern how children and grandchildren of Holocaust victims have come to grips with the events that shaped the lives of their parents or grandparents (Bergman and Jucovy 1982, Hass 1995).

10. *Collective memory discourse*: This project investigates how the 'collective memory' of the Holocaust has been formed. The key question is 'how is a society's identity and self-

understanding both created by and reflected in the selection from, and manipulation of, survivor accounts to create society's present 'collective memory' of the past?' (Browning 2003, 38–39; Black 2002).

No doubt there are other ways to divide the field of Holocaust testimony studies, and it may well be that some important directions – for instance within the philosophical discourse – do not find a natural place in the above. From the point of view of the reflection I wish to develop here, it does not matter much.

In reading the central texts of the above discourses, one is struck by the aim of many of the authors to find the one correct response or attitude to Holocaust testimony. The pursuit of this aim goes together with a dismissive attitude towards some or all of the other approaches. I cannot document this tendency for all of the ten. I shall therefore concentrate on the frequent criticisms of the legal and the historical-factual discourses by writers belonging to the other approaches.

Two objections to the courts' and the historians' way of approaching survivor testimony are especially central. The first objection is that the courts and the historians are preoccupied with demands for 'accuracy' and thus unable to respond to the 'authenticity' of the survivors' testimony (Michaelis 2011, 270, Browning 2003, 42). The second objection is that the courts as well as many historians have used survivor testimony primarily for purposes of illustrating facts that had already been established independently on the basis of written documents. The courts have also been criticized for not protecting survivor-witnesses from verbal attacks by perpetrators and their defence lawyers. Often this has resulted in the survivors becoming victims for a second time, this time victims of 'discursive power' (Michaelis 2011, 270).

A few striking quotes might give the flavour of the criticism. Aleida Assmann comments that the 'point' of survivor testimony 'is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the centre of events; [such testimonies] provide a personal view from within' (cited in Leonhard 2011, 25). Lawrence Langer insists that 'since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between the past and the present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy' (cited in Leonhard 2011, 25).

Dori Laub, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, insists that such Holocaust survivor testimony calls for a trauma-theoretic framework:

> The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation. In spite of the presence of amply documents, of searching artefacts and of fragmentary memoirs of anguish, he comes to look for something that is in fact non-existent; a record that has yet to be made. (Laub 1992, 57)

In the following often-cited passage Laub seeks to illustrate the inadequacy of the historians' preoccupation with accuracy. He mentions the testimony given to him by one Auschwitz survivor of the uprising of Sonderkommando 12 on 7 October 1944. The woman had reported that the chimneys of all four crematoria were blown up in the process. Laub presented this report in a meeting with historians who immediately dismissed the woman's testimony as 'hopelessly misleading'. After all, it is known from many other sources that only one chimney got destroyed on that day (1992, 61). Laub comments that the woman

> was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination. […] She saw four chimneys blowing up in Auschwitz: she saw, in other words, the unimaginable taking place right in front of her own eyes. And she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of

what she had eyewitnessed – this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz.
(Laub 1992, 62)

I have gone into a bit more detail regarding the criticism of the legal and the historical discourses on Holocaust testimony, since all other discourses seem unanimous in their unease with these two. But this is not to say that the remaining discourses do not come in for a fair amount of criticism as well. I shall here just mention a few instances.

There is little agreement, for example, on how written or oral testimony is best collected. The collecting efforts of the 1950s by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, were meant to be 'scientific research' and were based on nearly 500 standard questions, aiming for quantification. Such aims are now widely dismissed. 'History from below' and less structured forms of interaction fit better with the current intellectual climate (Kushner 2006, 278).

And yet the unstructured format, employed, for instance, by the Shoah Foundation (founded in 1994 by Steven Spielberg) has also come in for criticism. The interviewers have little training, and there is no systematic policy of assigning female interviewers to female witnesses. This has led critics to wonder whether these interviews will allow traumatized victims to really open up about their worst experiences (Leonhard 2011, 297). Given that the Shoah Foundation has assembled more than 50,000 testimonies, other critics have asked how this mass of material is to serve the foundation's stated goal of furthering worldwide tolerance (Levy and Sznaider 2007, 175).

According to Henry Greenspan, an advocate of a many-year or even life-long dialogical relationship between a few survivors and the researcher, the currently two main paradigms of listening to survivor testimony are 'bearing witness' (roughly the Shoah Foundation model) and

'trauma studies' (represented by first and foremost by Laub). Greenspan is highly critical of both. The one-off video-recorded interview 'is particularly liable to remain "superficial": Without a developing and deepening conversation, and the revising and elucidating that conversation brings, we are most likely to conclude that our presumptions have been confirmed' (Greenspan 1998, 33). Greenspan laments the 'modern crusade' to collect 'the greatest possible quantity' (1998, 48). And he rejects the 'triumphalist' discourse that looks for victims as heroes exhibiting 'the joy of survival' (1998, 47)

The second dominant paradigm is psychoanalysis. Greenspan uses Levi as his crown witness against this discourse:

'I do not believe that psychoanalysts (who have pounced upon our tangles with professional activity) are competent to explain this impulse,' Levi wrote. 'Their interpretations […] seem to me approximate and simplified, as if someone wished to apply the theorems of plane geometry to the solution of spheric triangles'. (1998, 32)

Other authors too have criticized Laub and his colleagues both for their general understanding of trauma and for the narrowness of their perspectives. Writes Tony Kushner: 'Langer, Felman, and Laub provide a naive, and ultimately patronizing, attitude toward the survivor testimonies, failing to acknowledge how the interviewees often strive to fit into the genre expected of them' (Kushner 2006, 286).

Finally, let me also note that even 'Holocaust', 'survivor' and 'testimony' are contested terms. The debates over whether we should speak of 'Shoa' rather than 'Holocaust' are perhaps too well known to be reviewed here. 'Survivor' has been found problematic in that it excludes testimony from people who died in the Holocaust but left behind letter, diaries or memoirs.

Greenspan is the most outspoken critic of 'testimony'. To him the word suggests 'a formal, finished quality that almost never characterizes survivors' remembrance' (1998, xvii):

> testimony as institutionalized and generally understood is more about knowing or learning from survivors than knowing or learning with them. Its gathering (particularly as recorded) is more likely to be concentrated in a single session than over the course of sustained conversation and acquaintance. It aspires to be as definitive as possible rather than evolving. As a genre, it is more like declaration – 'this I witnessed', 'this I believe' – than exploration'. (Greenspan 2014, 194)

Linguistic despair

Having introduced first hinge epistemology and then discourses about Holocaust survivor testimony, I can finally turn to the task of applying the first to the second. I begin with clarifying, with the help of 'hinge epistemology', the linguistic despair felt by many Holocaust testifiers.

The holocaust survivor reports on a social world – the concentration camp, the ghetto, the prison – in which many of our certainties no longer hold. Some of these lost certainties are the following:

Murder and violence are rare exceptions.

State authorities protect us from unwanted violence.

Doctors are there to cure our illnesses.

We do not torture the innocent.

Thirst is a rare occurrence amongst us.

We give special protection to the young, the elderly and the sick.

It is noteworthy that these kinds of certainties are not considered in Wittgenstein's On Certainty. And yet they too are beliefs with respect to which – at least in my social world – I feel confident to say that 'I cannot be making a mistake'. I am as certain of these propositions as I am of the beliefs that water boils at (roughly) degrees 100 Celsius or that the earth is (roughly) round. Someone who denied these propositions in my own culture would strike me either as making a sick joke or as being unreasonable in some other way. Moreover, we do not regard these propositions as needing justification. In fact, whatever could be presented as a justification for these beliefs would seem to be less certain than these beliefs are themselves.

What distinguishes these 'new' certainties from those studied in On Certainty is the fact that they straddle the line between epistemology and ethics. These certainties both describe our social mores and express 'moral certainties'. It is striking that Wittgenstein never considers this category. Maybe this is due to the fact that the starting points of his reflections were Moore's papers 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925) and 'Proof of an External World' (1939). Moore does not refer to moral certainties in these influential studies. The category is introduced, however, in Renford Bambrough's Moore-inspired book *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (1979). Bambrough argues that

> If we can show by Moore's argument that there is an external world, then we can show by parity of reasoning, by an exactly analogous argument, that we have moral knowledge, that there are some propositions of morals which are certainly true, and which we know to be true. (1979, 15)

Bambrough's main example is the following:

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, 15)

It follows for Bambrough that if a philosopher were to present an argument against the claim (that the child should be given an anaesthetic), Bambrough would be 'sure in advance that either at least one of the premises of his argument is false, or there is a mistake in the reasoning' (1979, 15).

Bambrough seeks to establish 'the objectivity of morals' against all forms of subjectivism and relativism (1979, 10). We do not have to go that far however in order to find the category of moral certainties important. Indeed, we might even deny that moral certainties can be 'known'. This would be in line with some of Wittgenstein's comments on Moore's proof (1969, §1). But we can hold on to the idea that there are moral beliefs that – at least in context – we take to be certain and thus beyond all reasonable doubt. They can be used to support other moral claims but do not need any moral backing up themselves. In this way we can imagine them as fundamental in our ethical system of beliefs, in the same way as other certainties are fundamental in our epistemic systems. By this I do not mean to suggest that our ethical and our epistemic systems are sharply divided. On the contrary, and to repeat, the certainties I listed at the beginning of this section straddle the boundary between the epistemic and the ethical: they describe our social-moral form of life, but they can also be used to state one's commitment to maintaining it.

The social-moral certainties are alike the other certainties also in that they play a role in our semantic understanding. That water boils at 100 degrees Celsius is (for most of us) part of our understanding of what the word 'water' means and that the earth is (roughly) round is part of our understanding what the 'earth' means. If one denies these certainties one loses one's grip on what

these words refer to. The same is true for the social-moral certainties. 'A medical doctor is there to help the sick or injured' is a certainty about the behaviour of doctors, but it is also closely associated with the definition of 'medical doctor'. When someone tells us that a medical doctor intentionally hurts rather heals the sick or injured we become uncertain whether the term 'medical doctor' is still appropriate.

We are now able to connect these remarks about social-moral certainties to the topic of linguistic despair. The Holocaust survivors struggle to express their experiences of extreme 'hunger' and 'thirst', of 'medical doctors' who kill and torture, of a total loss of 'trust', of constant 'fear' of immediate death, of 'chimneys' linked to the burning of human corpses and so on. I am putting these words in inverted commas to signal that to the survivors they do not seem adequate. The survivors realize the web of certainties that defines these words: certainties about the rarity of hunger and thirst, about the benevolence of medical doctors, the central role of trust in our lives and so forth. Each of these words, in their normal uses, invokes and relies on these certainties. And yet, the survivor employs these words to capture situations in which these certainties do not hold. This produces a constant semantic tension that cannot be removed by simple remedies, like, say, putting 'extreme' in front of 'hunger' or 'thirst'. Even 'extreme hunger' does not yet capture the case of a concentration camp designed to starve to death hundreds of thousands of human beings. It is easy to appreciate that the testifiers despair of finding the right words. The words that first suggest themselves – the words 'used by free human beings, beings who experience joy and sorrow in their home – are unable to do justice to what the victims suffered.

The tension is not just one between the victims and us (the later-day audience). The tension exists in the survivors themselves, too. When they testify years or decades after their

liberation, they too have returned to at least some of our social-moral certainties. They therefore despair of putting their experiences into the right words even for themselves.

We can further focus in on the peculiarities of linguistic despair using the previously used image of concentric circles. In some respects the Holocaust testifier seems to be on the outermost concentric circle (=c). After all, he talks about a situation in which many of our social-moral certainties have been destroyed. In fact, he seems to be further from us than even the remotest of exotic tribes. Exotic tribes might differ in their religious and metaphysical beliefs, but they are still 'like us' in valuing the things we value: love, learning, security or good health. But these are values that the 'death world' of the concentration camps was designed to destroy – at least for the inmates.

And yet, we also feel that the Holocaust survivor is much closer to 'home' than the train of thought of the last paragraph allows for. First of all, regardless of linguistic despair, the Holocaust survivor does speak our language and has – albeit with great difficulties – reintegrated to some extent into so-called ordinary social life. Second, the Holocaust survivor is not like an anthropologist reporting on a strange tribe. He reports on her very own life. And this life has a lot in common with my life. It was informed by a culture we both share and value – Western literature, music, philosophy or science. Indeed, victims and perpetrators were both shaped by this culture. Third, and most important, moral considerations forbid us – us Germans anyway – to think of the Nazi period as something far removed from us. The perpetrators were, if not in the generation of our parents, then at least in the generation of our grandparents (never mind whether our own grandparents were involved in atrocities or not). To think of the Holocaust testimony as a testimony from a cultural distance is to deny our own moral involvement and responsibility.

The difficulty of receiving Holocaust testimony in the right way is that it triggers incompatible responses in us, the audience. The sheer unimaginable brutality of the concentration camps tempts us to place the Holocaust world at an almost infinite distance from us. And our endless commonalities with both victims and perpetrators force us to accept that the Holocaust testimony comes not from afar, but very much from the core of our own culture. There is no easy way out of this tension.

What does this difficulty of the audience have to do with the linguistic despair of the Holocaust survivors? Everything. The survivor's central difficulty is to find a language, a narrative, a style, that prevents the testimony and hence the testifier, from being placed beyond the realm of our community. To capture their horrendous experiences the testifiers have to speak against our certainties. But the more he succeeds in this task, the greater the danger of being heard as reporting on a distant and incredible world.

We can push further by looking at Holocaust testimony through the lens of Wittgenstein's critical analysis of scepticism. Recall from the second section of this chapter that, according to On Certainty, radical philosophical scepticism is something of an empty, impossible, attempt to say something meaningful. The sceptic tries to convince us that some of our central certainties – say, about objects and events in the external world – are possibly false. And yet, in order to be meaningful, the sceptic's words have to rely on these very same certainties as true.

Am I suggesting that Holocaust survivor testimony cannot be said either? If I did, I would have arrived, via a very different route, at a thesis that has been put forward by some historians and philosophers (e.g. Agamben 1998). These authors argue that the whole truth about the Holocaust could only be expressed by those who have experienced its horror to the final extreme: the victims killed in the gas chambers or the concentration camp inmates who had reached the

state of 'Muselmann'. The Muselmann had given up all hope of survival, had lost his will to live and had completely withdrawn from all human interactions. On the assumption that the latter died, the full truth about the Holocaust would forever elude us.

To be clear, I am not endorsing this view and thus am not seeking to arrive at it via a new route. Rather than declaring testimony about the Holocaust to be impossible, I want to probe the difficulties and tensions central to it. I shall now do so by working through the three problems that Wittgenstein finds in scepticism.

The first problem was the 'problem of continuity': the sceptic must be able to present his concepts of 'doubt' or '(possible) error' as continuous with the concepts of 'doubt' and 'error' as we use these in everyday life. Wittgenstein claimed that the sceptic is unable to do this. Does the same analysis work for the concepts that Holocaust survivors single out as problematic?

Consider the term 'medical doctor' once more. A Holocaust survivor who reports on the heinous crimes of 'Doctor' Mengele is undoubtedly using the term 'doctor' in a way that differs from our ordinary understanding. The survivor is speaking about a doctor systematically interested in terminating rather than maintaining life; a doctor completely unmoved by Bambrough's moral certainty that a child 'who is about to undergo what would otherwise be painful surgery, should be given an anaesthetic before the operation'. When it came to his experiments on Jewish twins, Dr Mengele saw no need at all for an anaesthetic. If we call Mengele a 'doctor' then we can say what Wittgenstein said about sceptical error in the earlier cited §138: if I speak of a medical doctor here, this changes the role of 'doctor' in our lives.

And yet, it seems that the analogy between 'sceptical error' and 'medical doctor' goes only so far. There are far more commonalities between Mengele and our doctors than between sceptical and ordinary errors. However cruel and inhumane Mengele was in his treatment of

concentration camp inmates, he presumably treated fellow SS men and their families in pretty much the way we expect of our medical doctors. And Mengele had the formal credentials of a medical doctor. This limits the problem of continuity but it does not remove the plausibility of linguistic despair: for precisely because there are many continuities between our doctors and Mengele, the Holocaust survivor must be troubled by the thought that his testimony will not be understood in the right way. The audience might not fully appreciate the extent to which Mengele was – in his dealings with inmates – discontinuous with our doctors. Moreover, it is important to note that simply adding a qualification like 'to us Mengele was a doctor in all but title, etc.' will often not be able to do the job. This is because the qualification – once it is properly spelled out – might invoke more and more terms that also need to be qualified. Thus for the case of 'medical doctor', these further terms are likely to be, inter alia, 'death', 'life', 'treatment' or 'selection'. And a term like 'death' will have to be qualified with terms like 'person', 'indignity', 'Muselmann', 'chimney', 'gas chamber' – all of which are again problematic terms. Perhaps the sheer number of qualifications will be too great for an audience to easily process. And the fear of Holocaust testifiers that their testimony will not be understood aright does seem reasonable when it relates to this difficulty. I do not think that the problem is insurmountable; I do not think that the Holocaust testifier is directly analogous to the sceptic, but, still, the predicament is real, and the comparison helps to bring this out.

Wittgenstein's second problem for epistemological scepticism was that it carries with it a commitment to meaning scepticism. After all, my knowledge of what my words mean is empirical knowledge, too. Thus if we are sceptics about the external world, we should also be sceptics about the meaning of our words. In other words, we should commit to the possibility that no one ever means anything by any word.

The survivor-testifier about the Holocaust does not of course raise error possibilities about the external world per se. But she does seek to make plausible that a radical breakdown of trust in others is possible; that the very cement of our moral universe might be absent. Indeed, she does not just trade in possibilities; she relates to us a historical setting where such trust, such cement, was in fact missing.

Does such an absence of trust affect language? Does it affect one's trust in language as a means of communication? A positive answer is central for instance in Paul Celan's reflections on language and speech after the Holocaust (cf. Derrida 2005, Hartmann 1999, Weigel 1999). Recall that one of Celan's collections is entitled 'Sprachgitter' (Celan 1966; cf. Lehmann 2005): 'mesh' or 'iron bars of language'. (The title was inspired by the 'mesh' that once separated nuns from their visitors.) In Celan's poetry it is language itself that has come to form the mesh or the bars separating him – as a survivor of the holocaust – from us. The collection Sprachgitter contains a poem by the same name. It talks of the attempt of two people to communicate through 'the bars'. Their eyes meet, but these are 'dreamless and dreary'. The 'I' of the poem wishes: 'Wärichwie du. Wärst du wieich'. (If only I were like you. If only you were like me.) But it realizes 'WirsindFremde'. ('We are strangers'.) And the poem ends with 'zweiMundvollSchweigen' ('two mouthful of silence'). Elsewhere Celan writes of his language having 'had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech'. He adds that his language 'gave [him] no words for what was happening' (1986, 34). Celan tried to make up new words to make the unspeakable linguistically accessible. The potential problem of this strategy is of course incomprehension on the part of the (non-expert) reader.

Celan's scepticism concerning the possibility of reaching us by means of language is no doubt different from the meaning-sceptical conclusion that no one ever means anything by any word. The problem is rather that Celan felt unable to mean anything with the specific words of the German language, the language of those who killed his parents in labour camps. But there remains this commonality with the second problem for the sceptic: in both cases the breakdown of trust in one area – in the deliveries of our senses in the case of the sceptic, in the benevolence of others in the case of Celan – ends up undermining trust in another: trust in language and meaning.

Finally, Wittgenstein's third problem for the sceptic was that scepticism about the external-world collapses into global scepticism about everything. More radically, Wittgenstein sometimes claims that denying even one of our certainties can bring down their whole structure (1969, §490). 'not only do I never have the slightest doubt that I am called that ['Ludwig Wittgenstein'], but there is no judgement I could be certain of if I started doubting about that'.) This view should not be taken to rule out the possibility of our encountering strangers – 'tribesmen' – who do not share our certainties. The point is that if someone in my culture were to tell me that my name is not 'Martin Kusch' or that I do not have two hands, I would become unsure whether I can still rely on any of my other certainties. We should perhaps also restrict the possibility of this dramatic scenario to only some of our certainties. If someone were to tell me that the boiling water is not 100 degrees Celsius, but a slightly different value, I would not be forced to give up many of my other certainties.

Wittgenstein's example of his own name is pertinent for the comparison with the linguistic despair of the Holocaust victim. Consider the effect of being stripped of your name, say 'Primo Levi', and being forced to use instead a number, '174517', that is tattooed on your

forearm. This number registered Levi's time of arrival at Auschwitz and his status as an inmate of the category 'Jewish', that is as an inmate destined for destruction. The point of the number was to erase his 'life-world' identity and to replace it with a Holocaust 'death world' identity. It was a steady reminder that the Jewish inmates' 'last duty was to die' (Améry 1977, 39).

It is not difficult to imagine that such 're-naming' brings with it the final collapse of all the certainties of normal social life. Jean Améry has written about the effect of 'the first blow' suffered by an inmate:

> The first blow makes clear to the inmate that he is helpless – and thereby it already contains all that will follow later. […] One can do with me what one wants. Outside no-one knows about this, and no-one can defend me. Whoever would like to come to help, a wife, a mother, a brother or friend – they won't get in here. (1977, 55)

Améry here alludes to the breakdown of our ordinary social-moral certainties that follows from the first blow. All I would add here is the replacing of one's name with a tattooed number both confirmed this breakdown and established a new set of certainties. And the most important of these certainties was the 'duty to die' quickly.

Here too I would not go so far as to suggest that the inmates suffered a global collapse of all certainties. But it makes sense to attribute to (many of) them a wide-ranging breakdown of their social-moral belief system. Maybe the figure of the 'Muselmann' does encapsulate this breakdown most dramatically. After all, the Muselmänner did no longer interact with others; had given themselves up; were extremely disoriented; and just waited to die.

Let me try to sum up what picture emerges from contrasting Wittgenstein on scepticism with holocaust testimony. Looking at Holocaust testimony through the lens of On Certainty

brings the survivors' linguistic despair into sharper relief: it helps to highlight the discontinuities between (a) the existing public, 'ordinary' language, (b) the language used in the concentration camps and (c) the new language needed to capture (d) as well the experiences of the victims in the camps. These discontinuities are strong and substantial enough to confirm the sense of many victims and secondary sources that communicating the victims' experiences in ordinary language was and is very difficult. But there is no support for the thought that these experiences cannot be communicated at all.

Relativism

Up to this point I have used Wittgenstein's observations on certainties and radical scepticism to throw light on the linguistic despair of Holocaust survivors when they try to put their terrible experiences into words. In this section I turn to another central theme in On Certainty: relativism. Above I suggested that Wittgenstein's relativistic leanings are well captured in Bernhard Williams's 'relativism of distance'. This form of relativism is based on the idea that, in reflecting on the practices of other cultures or individuals, we sometimes conclude that our terms of evaluation do not get a proper grip on their actions and practices. I now want to suggest that this is an adequate description of some of my – and perhaps, our – responses to certain accounts of what happened in the camps, prisons and ghettos during the Nazi period. Consider the following passage:

> Anna G. […] tells of a ten-year-old girl who refused to go to the 'left' (towards death) after the selection. [The members of her transport had learned the meaning of left and right in this context.] Kicking and scratching, the young girl was seized by three SS men who held her down while she screamed to her nearby mother that

she shouldn't let them kill her. […] One of the SS men approached the mother, who was only in her late twenties [and standing on the right], and asked her if she wanted to go with her daughter. 'No', the mother replied. (Langer 1991)

My response to this narrative is as follows. I cannot bring myself to either condemn or excuse the mother's action. The situation is so extreme, so conflicting, so far from my ordinary life that I am left with a sense of confusion or speechlessness. And this situation has not changed over the roughly two years during which I have known of, and contemplated, this passage. The case of the mother's action seems to me to be as clear a case as any I can imagine for a situation in which my moral categories of appraisal do not get a grip. Lest I be misunderstood, this response of non-appraisal only concerns the actions of the mother, not the actions of the SS men in question. For the latter I am convinced that my existing moral standards and concepts suffice for a condemnation of what they did on this and on most other occasions. Nor am I saying that all actions of the Nazis' victims fall within the remit of my relativistic response. For instance, 'Kapos' often acted in ways that were despicable by any decent person's standards. Finally, I doubt that it is possible to give necessary and sufficient intrinsic conditions for those actions of Holocaust victims that call for such a relativistic response.

There is a second way too to bring relativism into my discussion of Holocaust testimony. This second way concerns how we should relate to the variety of approaches to Holocaust testimony distinguished above. I want to suggest that epistemic relativism is one plausible response to this variety.

To bring these different approaches into the reach of Wittgenstein's discussion, we first need to think of each of them as an epistemic-cum-ethical system in its own right. This move should not be too controversial; after all, Wittgenstein speaks of physics and of Lavoisier's

chemistry as 'systems' of beliefs. And Georg-Henrik von Wright, the distinguished editor of

some of Wittgenstein's writings, has pointed out parallels between Wittgenstein's 'systems of

belief' and Thomas Kuhn's paradigms (von Wright 1972). Note also that developing this parallel

does not commit us to saying that the different approaches to Holocaust testimony – these

different epistemic-ethical systems of belief – live in different worlds or are semantically

incommensurable. It cannot be denied that these systems share numerous certainties, not least of

them that the Holocaust has taken place and that Holocaust testimony is to be taken seriously.

But there are also important differences in the certainties of these systems. Some of these

differences concern methods. Clearly, the lawyers' and judges' methods for probing the veracity

and accuracy of a witness differ fundamentally from the methods used by psychoanalysts or those

concerned with the testifiers' identity building or their life history. These differences of methods

are related to different certainties about the very point of engaging with Holocaust survivor

testimony. It is an obvious certainty for those acting within the epistemic system of the law that

the goal is to determine whether the accused is criminally guilty. It is a certainty for people

working within the epistemic system of psychoanalysis that trauma is the central phenomenon to

be studied and treated. The different systems also have some results that – for the time being

anyway – they take to be certainties. Thus in the realm of the law the belief that, say, Wilhelm

Friedrich Boger was guilty of murder in at least five cases, is now a certainty. After all, this is

what a court of law (the Auschwitz trial) determined in 1965 beyond reasonable doubt. It is a

certainty in the psychoanalytic epistemic system that many children of Holocaust victims suffer

from secondary trauma. And so on.

I mentioned above that advocates of the different epistemic-cum-ethical systems criticize

some or all of the others. The legal and the historical epistemic-cum-ethical systems are most

often attacked for their alleged inability to do justice to the victims' 'authenticity'. The legal system is also taken to task for using victims' testimony merely illustratively and for not protecting the testifiers from attacks by the defendants' lawyers. Is there anything that can be said in defence of the lawyers and the historians? I think there is.

To begin with, it is just not true that all courts have used survivors' testimony merely for illustrative purposes. The Auschwitz trial, for example, was based almost exclusively on the testimony of 409 witnesses, of which 359 testified in person. 248 of these were former inmates, of which 96 where Jewish and 132 political prisoners (91 of the 409 were former SS men) (Pendas 2006, 102). The convictions were based in almost every point on witness statements. Giving evidence in court thus did achieve a very important goal.

Critics of the courts' handling of survivors' testimony will not be impressed with my plea. After all, the ways in which the presiding judge and the defence lawyers treated victims on the witness stand has been far from unproblematic. Some defence lawyers questioned the all victims' ability report objectively (Wittmann 2005, 205; Pendas 2006, 146). Throughout the proceedings the presiding judge interrupted witnesses to cut short accounts of their feelings. Devin Pendas, the author of a book-length study of Auschwitz trial (2006), diagnoses a 'tension' between 'factual and experiential truth' as 'one of the leitmotifs during the evidentiary phase of the Auschwitz Trial' (2006, 102, 167). Pendas also seems unhappy with the fact that the court used internal and external consistency as well as emotional demeanour as key factors for assessing survivors' testimony. The fact that a witness was very upset indicated to the court that the testimony might be unreliable (2006, 238–239).

Needless to say, much of this criticism is justified. The presiding judge could no doubt have been a lot more forthright in controlling some of the defence lawyers, and no doubt he could

have given witnesses a lot more time to go beyond the information strictly relevant to the

criminal case. The fact that the trial already lasted twenty-one months is hardly an excuse. At the

same time, it cannot be emphasized enough that this was a criminal trial and that the guilt of the

accused has to be established according to strictest legal standards. The court itself was very

aware of the possibility of wrong convictions. In his justification of the verdicts the presiding

judge referred to a recent case in which an SS man had been convicted of the murder of a Jewish

social-democratic member of parliament who later turned out to be alive and well (Mauz 1965).

Moreover, my own study of the case against Wilhelm Boger showed that of the forty-

three witnesses heard against him, the testimony of twenty-eight was not challenged at all; the

testimony of twelve was rejected because it directly contradicted that of other witnesses or did

not fit with other information obtained from other sources. Boger was found guilty of more than

one specific charge on the basis of a single witness statement. Nor were emotional reactions

without impact on the legal decision. For example, one Jewish witness, Maryla Rosenthal, had

given a fairly positive account of Boger's personality. Later her husband reported to the court that

his wife had had a serious gallbladder attack as a result of the interrogation. The court realized

that Rosenthal's testimony 'was clearly influenced by paranoia' and that 'overwhelming fear was

the motivating factor behind her reticence about Boger's actions' and 'noted her reactions as part

of case against the accused' (Wittmann 2005, 87).

Overall, it seems to me that while one can accuse specific judges and lawyers of acting

unjustly in both epistemic and ethical respects, it is much more difficult, if not downright

impossible, to globally accuse the legal epistemic-cum-ethical system of unfairness towards the

Holocaust survivors as testifiers. Given the courts' remit to establish criminal guilt they have to

concern themselves primarily with the veracity and accuracy of testimony. In so doing the courts do not get survivors' testimony wrong; they get it right – given their purpose.

Turning from the courts to history, it is much easier to find voices willing to defend the preoccupation with accuracy in the study of testimonies of survivors. One such voice is that of a survivor, Primo Levi. Levi urges us to 'read' recollections 'with a critical eye': 'in the inhuman conditions to which they were subjected, the prisoners could barely acquire an overall vision of their universe' (1986, 16–17). Peter Black expresses the historian's tensions particularly aptly:

> I never quite escape the queasy feeling that when I question the accuracy or the consistency of a survivor statement, I disrespect the memory of those who died and hurt those who are still with us. If, on the other hand, we do not apply the professional standards to survivor testimony that we do to all evidence, and if we permit statements that other sources can refute to stand as accurate despite our better professional judgements, do we not inflict greater damage in the long run both to the accuracy of the history and the honour of those who perished? (Black 2002, 47)

And Black goes on to remind us of a number of high-profile cases – from Demjanjuk to Wilkomirski, Gray and Strummer – where historians' and lawyers' attention to accuracy leads to crucially important corrections, either of a legal verdict or of the assessment of the veracity of narratives offered as testimony (2002, 48).

Christopher Browning – perhaps the most important historian working with survivors' testimonies – seconds these sentiments: 'Survivor testimony cannot be accorded a privileged status, immune from the same careful examination of evidence to which our profession routinely subjects other sources' (2003, 84). Browning is rightly famous for his case studies of the complex of Jewish factory slave labour camps in Starachowice. For these camps relying on survivor

testimony is crucial since they are only rarely mentioned in surviving German documents. If we want to know what happened in Starachowice, we have no alternative but to consider all of the existing testimonies, judge the reliability of each one against the others and put together a complicated puzzle. By the historians' standards, this is the only correct way to proceed.

My conclusion for the historical epistemic-cum-ethical systems thus parallels my conclusion for the legal discourse: We cannot convict the historians' discourse tout court as doing an injustice to Holocaust survivors. There are no doubt better and worse ways – more or less just ways – of writing history on the basis of survivor testimony, but the historical epistemic-cum-ethical system as a whole does not deserve dismissal. It does serve important purposes that we all value.

Constraints of space prevent me from trying to give even sketchy defences of all the other discourses concerned in various ways with Holocaust survivor testimony. But I believe that such defences are possible in all these cases. It is reasonable and valuable to find out how survivors built new identities; whether their suffering can be captured in psychoanalytic terms; whether the survivors are at all able to communicate their experiences; how their thoughts and grievances have developed over time; how many of them successfully rebuilt their lives; how their children and grandchildren have been affected; and what role the Holocaust plays in our collective memory.

If all of these epistemic-cum-ethical systems have their respective goals, how then should we think of their relationship? There are, I believe, three main options here:

1.   *Monism-absolutism*: While it is true that at present there are a number of epistemic-*cum*-ethical systems concerned with Holocaust testimony, in the long run this multitude will

and should reduce drastically. Maybe some approaches will turn out altogether invalid, maybe a combination of them will lead to the one correct approach. But there is only one correct answer to every dispute that currently arises.

2.   *Pluralism*: The different epistemic-*cum*-ethical systems concerned with Holocaust testimony complement rather than contradict one other, at least in the long run. Hence we have good reason to support and maintain all of them. They each deliver a part of the truth. They each have their own standards. We should encourage debate between them, as this is likely to make each of them better even when measured in its own terms. But we should not allow debate to lead to the termination of any, or most, of them.

3.   *Relativism*: The different epistemic-*cum*-ethical systems concerned with Holocaust testimony answer to two sets of epistemic and ethical values. Some of those values are internal to systems and different from system to system. Other values are external and common to all. The external values give some motivation for each of the systems, but leave underdetermined how each system is to be built and developed. The external values do not allow for a neutral ranking between the systems. The development of the different systems happens in light of the internal values. Epistemic and ethical justifications of particular judgments about the Holocaust are therefore relative to the different systems. A claim can be justified relative to one system and not justified relative to another. (Take the claim 'In the Auschwitz uprising four chimneys were blown up'; this claim might be 'justified-in-the-psychoanalytic-system' but 'unjustified-in-the-historians'-system'.)

Note that relativism as so defined does not coincide with Williams' 'relativism of distance'. The point is not that the evaluative terms of different systems do not get a grip on one another. The

point is rather that a significant part of such criticism is question-begging insofar as it is based on standards and criteria not shared with the targeted system.

I have already signalled that the absolutist-monist response is implausible in this case. It seems obvious to me that the different systems answer to different values and that neither convergence nor reduction seem likely scenarios. This leaves the choice between pluralism and relativism. Adjudicating between them involves intricate issues in epistemology and semantics that go far beyond what I can deliver here. Suffice it to say three things. First, both pluralism and relativism allow for, or even call for, a plurality of approaches to Holocaust testimony. Second, both of them can also make sense of critical engagement between approaches. Relativism can do so in terms of external values. And even question-begging criticism may at times be helpful to the recipient. Third, my distinction between internal and external values enables us to block a worry that arises whenever someone tries to apply pluralist or relativist ideas to epistemic-cum-ethical systems concerned with Holocaust testimony.

The worry concerns the system of beliefs of Holocaust deniers like Ernst Zündel, Robert Faurisson, Richard Williamson or David Irving. Is not the relativist or pluralist committed to treating the discourse of Holocaust deniers as epistemically and ethically on a par with the aforementioned discourses? Are the pluralist or relativist able to reject as unjustified the statement 'the Holocaust never happened'? In my view both the pluralist and the relativist have resources to reject the Holocaust deniers and to not see them as equal to other discourses about the Holocaust.

The pluralist's answer is more straightforward. She can simply reject the idea that the Holocaust deniers' systems of beliefs contribute to finding the truth. After all the pluralist can be selective in choosing epistemic-cum-ethical systems that she regards as worthy of support.

Fortunately, on my account, the relativist can do something similar. The distinction between internal and external values allows for the possibility that a system of beliefs might be ruled out of bounds in light of the external values. In other words, the Holocaust denier goes against a certainty that is both internal to different epistemic-cum-ethical systems and external – that is shared by all reasonable and honest people. The problem with Holocaust deniers is that they do not play by minimal rules of scientific propriety. This was determined, for example, in the 1998 libel case brought by David Irving against Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books. The verdict by Mr Justice Gray contained the following account of Irving's work:

> He distorts accurate historical evidence and information; misstates; misconstrues; misquotes; falsifies statistics; falsely attributes conclusions to reliable sources; manipulates documents; wrongfully quotes from books that directly contradict his arguments in such a manner as completely to distort their authors' objectives and while counting on the ignorance or indolence of the majority of readers not to realise this […] wears blinkers and skews documents and misrepresents data in order to reach historically untenable conclusions specifically those that exonerate Hitler. (quoted from Eaglestone 2004, 243)

In acting in this way Holocaust deniers exclude themselves from the realm of science and decency. We therefore do not need to treat them as equal to the aforementioned discourses. We can and should reject Holocaust deniers.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to make a contribution to philosophical reflections about Holocaust testimony from perspectives drawn from Wittgenstein's On Certainty. I have tried to map –

employing Wittgenstein's remarks on language, certainties and scepticism as my points of comparison – the various tensions in the testimony of Holocaust survivors. They report on a world in which many of our social-moral certainties had been destroyed using a language presupposing that these very certainties are in place. The introduction of social-moral certainties is important for making the comparison work. If we only focus on the epistemic realm we will miss an essential realm of certainties. Like other certainties, so also social-moral certainties are involved in the meaning of our words. Our certainty that doctors help those who suffer is part of our understanding of what the word 'doctor' means. The Holocaust testifier must use the term 'doctor' while suspending this certainty. Moreover, she also faces the problem that her audience struggles to situation her appropriately on the scale of the 'close' and the 'far' 'from us'. In some respects the 'death world' of the concentration camp is further from us than even the most exotic of tribes. And yet, in other respects this death world is uncomfortably close to us. I also related Holocaust testimony to Wittgenstein's remarks on scepticism. We saw rough parallels to Wittgenstein's three problems with scepticism. First, like the sceptic so also the Holocaust survivor struggles to make her terms partially continuous, partially discontinuous with our words. Second, the Holocaust survivor also has problems with language as a whole. He has lost trust in the language once shared with the perpetrators and indeed lost trust in language as a means to reach others. Above I quoted Celan, here I add a remark by Améry: 'We left the camp, naked, robbed, empty, disoriented – and it took a long time before we had learnt again the ordinary language of freedom. Even today we speak it only uncomfortably and without much trust in its validity' (1977, 44). And, third, I suggested that while the Holocaust victim did not have to endure the collapse of all certainties – here she is a better position than Wittgenstein's sceptic – the collapse of almost all social-moral certainties is dramatic enough. I have also attempted to

develop two kinds of relativistic responses to aspect of Holocaust survivor testimony. On the one hand, I have suggested that Wittgenstein's relativism of distance captures some of our responses to reports about certain actions and decisions by victims. On the other hand, I have proposed a form of epistemic relativism to capture the interrelations between certain discourses about Holocaust testimony.

I am only too aware that this chapter is little more than a first foray into largely uncharted territory. I can only hope that others will push further and deeper than I was able to do here. The topic is clearly too important for mainstream Anglophone ('analytic') philosophy to ignore.

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