Wittgenstein on 'Certainty' (1969)
And the implications for 'spiritual exploration' as well as for philosophical metaphysics

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to sketch out a contrast between the kind of 'philosophising' practiced by the likes of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and those of a similar mindset; and 'philosophising' in the pursuit of an accurate understanding of one's ordinary experiential existence, specifically with a view to achieving an insight into it, such that one might proceed in the direction of resolving the mystery at the core of our experience. (Whether or not this latter approach is any way 'meaningful' or 'sensical' or 'practicable' etc will not be discussed here, but left for elsewhere.)

Introduction

Now to many of those whose ability to observe and analyse 'objectively and impartially' the metaphysical facts of their own experiential existence may have been damaged and corrupted by exposure to academic philosophy, this whole project will surely seem both wrong-headed and absurd, as well as most likely poisoned by New Age silliness and conceptual naivete. This is seriously mistaken, and, as will be demonstrated, the kind of observational and analytical capacities required to appreciate what follows are infinitely more demanding than those required to grasp logical positivist musings. Read on and see for yourself. (Of course this is not to say that what follows is in any way definitive, or authoritative, or unimprovable, but it will ask questions not normally encountered in any philosophical inquiry.)

The centrepoint for this article is Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical 'certainty'. We have chosen to analyse it in two ways: (1) an analysis of how Wittgenstein reached his conclusions, focussing on the evolution of key ideas from the Tractatus via Philosophical Investigations and 'language game' to 'On Certainty'; and (2) whether or not the ideas in 'On Certainty' are of any value when it comes to metaphysical self-insight, relating to the quest to resolve the mystery of the human predicament.

Background (in the simplest possible terms): What is 'certainty' and why would anyone be interested in it? 'Certainty' is one of those ideas which, when it comes to philosophy and metaphysics and spirituality, seems to have great currency, meaning that it is believed to possess great significance and importance. The proposition here is that if we, as ordinary human beings, can base our thoughts, desires and aspirations on 'conceptions' which are demonstrably certain and incontestable and indubitable, then we are in an optimal position to proceed in whatever direction it is that we want to travel, spiritually speaking. If our ideas are correct, and accurate, and objectively 'right', then surely we must be in a better position than someone whose ideas are inaccurate and mistaken and just plain 'wrong'? This seems self-evident, but if you're genuinely interested in the human mind and its workings – with a view to gaining insight into this capacity and its limitations – then it's definitely worth asking yourself why we should hold fast to this perspective. Is being clever and right ultimately better than being wrong and stupid? And better for what, exactly? Who's to say? God? And so on, in terms of an open-ended and relentless inquiry.

But let's hold for now to the idea that conceptual certainty is somehow objectively better in every way than ideational uncertainty and confusion, with a view to examining and analysing this position as constructively as best we can. And as somewhere to begin, and as a point of orientation, we have chosen Wittgenstein's examination of the concept, as it appears in his text 'On Certainty' (1969). We have chosen Wittgenstein because he's considered – in certain circles – to be extremely perspicacious philosophically, and perhaps even to have presented the most insightful analysis of the subject of

'certainty' to date (cf Moyal-Sharrock, et al; see bibliog.) – at least in analytic philosophical terms. We can but take a look.

We need at the outset to say something about Wittgenstein's way of thinking, and what it was he was trying to do, as we find it represented in his idiosyncratic style of writing. This is not meant to be a criticism as much as a perspectival characterisation, and it will help to explain at least in part how we can distinguish between mere philosophical musings and genuine spiritual exploration.

Wittgenstein came to believe that the purpose of philosophising was to save ourselves from being bewitched by language. This itself was based on the 'scientistic' idea that language itself amounted to something like an objective representation of the mind and of all thinking, and to the extent that we are able to gain insight into the actual operations and workings of language, we are at the same time gaining insight into the workings of the mind. Mental mystification – such as we are in thrall to it – can be resolved and dispensed with by a careful study of the way we ordinarily use language.

What exactly was, or is, the 'scientism' that Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle and others subscribed to? What was behind their whole approach to understanding the way the human mind works? It is basically the idea that, through the application of a combination of the abstractions to be found in philosophical logic, natural science and mathematics, any and all 'truths' – facts – about 'life, existence, the universe and everything' could be grasped, explicated – explained – and made clear in such a way that the kind of confusions and ambiguities and uncertainties that persist in certain types of thinking – say religion and mysticism, for example – could be reduced to a minimum, if not done away with completely.

(Beale et al (2019) have argued that Wittgenstein was 'anti-scientistic' in that he believed 'science' had been 'overestimated', but the sense in which we are using the label here refers to a subliminal faith in a positivistic project that logic and mathematics and analytic clarification could lead to the ultimate resolution of metaphysical difficulties.)

Now this doctrine – which we can label 'logical positivism' in certain very broad-brush terms – has undergone various evolutionary changes since its original formulation at the time of the Vienna Circle (c1920s-1930s), but the belief in the meaningfulness of a theoretical approach to life and existence decisively cleansed of mysticism and metaphysics is still very persuasive today, and can be found underpinning the speculations of many prominent scientists, for example Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins and Roger Penrose, to name but a few.

'Scientism' - when it comes to the activities of scientists themselves, is relatively straightforward in philosophical terms, and it amounts to a belief in the idea that the progressive development of natural science – in laboratories and through technology – is not only enhancing the quality of life as 'ordinarily lived' by human beings; it is also, by default and by implication, 'explaining' and clarifying the meaning and purpose of life as it goes along. As scientists see it, we don't need to concern ourselves with metaphysical issues because they have no relevance or significance in a world increasingly perfected by scientific advancement. And if we don't have all the answers today, we'll soon have them tomorrow. Physical immortality and interplanetary travel and just around the corner; and scientists can deal with any other difficulties as and when they appear.

Philosophers like Wittgenstein believed that a logical positivistic perspective could very usefully be applied to 'ordinary thinking', especially as manifest in our everyday use of 'everyday language'. This might appear to be no more than an uncontentious description of the application of standard philosophical discipline – the sort of thing you learn as an undergraduate in your first few weeks - in which you need to learn to define your terms, as well as explain how you arrived at your definition, as well as learning to stick to the point - as part of a process of learning the basics of how to present a philosophical argument.

But the logical positivist approach to ordinary language philosophy turns out to be infinitely more prejudicial than it appears to be on the surface, and soon shows itself to be utterly incapable of

metaphysical exploration and analysis, and in so doing condemns itself – if you're interested in spiritual metaphysics - to a peculiar form of self-validating irrelevance. It's like having a full set of sharpened instruments, but you can't think of what to use them for. Worse still, the more you sharpen your tools for action, the less you seem to be able to understand their purpose. The philosopher in this scenario becomes a weird kind of 'language nerd', so highly specialised as to be of no use to anybody but themselves.

It's worth having a look at how Wittgenstein ended up as he did. We can begin with his first major text, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), which is a vaguely adolescent, clever-dick undergrad attempt at a decisive and definitive account of 'what's what' when it comes to thought, and logic, and philosophy. It consists of a series of cryptic declarative propositions, supposedly linked to one another derivatively and consequentially, laying out all we need to know when it comes to thinking about thinking. Of course it's not complete rubbish, but it does its level best to come close. It's a classic scientistic attempt at putting metaphysics to bed, and so probably would have made great bedtime reading for the likes of Stephen Hawking and Alfred Ayer.

Now those who see the Tractatus as having a certain logical positivist value will very swiftly want to shift the discussion away from generalities – like the ones employed in the previous paragraph - and on to specifics, like 'show me exactly were Wittgenstein went wrong in the Tractatus; point to the passages and explain what's wrong with them', such that one is forced to debate according to the very set of rules one is disputing, and therefore putting oneself at a serious discursive disadvantage. The reasons for this are complex, but far and away the most important one is that academic philosophy is quite unable to embark on first-person objective metaphysical observation, exploration and analysis, much preferring instead studying and commenting on – in an approved, orthodox and highly constrained way - supposedly institutionally-validated 'key' texts, whether of a historically significant nature, or perhaps currently all the rage. All of which means that texts like the Tractatus are – depending on the institution and its predilections - accorded a certain almost inviolable status.

This need not concern us, and we only mention it in passing. The point to be made is that the Tractatus is a declarative text of a quasi-theological nature in the church of logical positivism, and as such is a distinctly authoritarian intervention in a context which supposedly encourages patient argument and analysis. Positivism itself exerts a subliminally mystical hold on those who believe in the supremacy of natural scientific objectivity, in much the same way as subliminal beliefs direct the energies of those who subscribe to other ideological doctrines, whatever their content and purpose.

And Wittgenstein soon came to see for himself the inadequacies of the reductive extremism represented by the Tractatus, and so began to modify his approach to intellectual analysis – supposedly as a result of new insights into the linguistic phenomena he was interested in – yet without abandoning the idea that a certain very distinctive and specifically abstracted understanding of 'language' and 'its function in thought' is somehow key to understanding all the crucial philosophical issues that perplex us.

We need to stand back and clarify Wittgenstein's idea, because it's a great mistake to take Wittgenstein's perspective as read – meaning as unproblematic - and so to plunge into exactly the kind of explorations and analyses that he believed flowed organically from looking at ordinary language and ordinary language usage from his distinctive perspective. The mistake here is to believe that deploying a certain kind of rarified thinking obviates the need to make clear not only the presuppositions on which the perspective is based, but – if you're interested in drilling through to the core (and most academic philosophers are not) – then it's incumbent on whoever is arguing a position to show not only where it all ends up, but what – if any – essential limitations and defects the whole process might have.

In Wittgenstein's case, he believed both the process and the endpoint had been wholly or partially resolved – at least adequately dealt with- in his intellectual alliance with logical positivism around the time of the Vienna Circle. This meant that he was effectively free to continue his explorations of 'ordinary language use' without needing to present anything like a convincing justification of what it

was he was up to, and what, in the end would be achieved by his studies. It was infused with a kind of elemental 'self-evidence'.

What did he think he was doing? There are 3 quotes from his Philosophical Investigations (1953) which aptly illustrate his perspective:

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'
 (pt. 1, sect. 109)
'The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.'
 (pt. 1, sect. 255)
'What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.'
 (pt. 1, sect. 309)

The idea here is that the activity of a certain specific type of 'clarity of thought' (of a logical positivistic nature) can not only elucidate supposed philosophical difficulties, it can at the same time also dissipate and resolve them, thanks to the fact that, because language bewitches us, these supposed difficulties were never really 'problems' in the first place. Philosophical/metaphysical problems are only problems if we allow language to enchant us with imaginings; so to the extent that we can disperse the imaginative smoke, we can resolve philosophical/metaphysical issues at the same time.

And as part of his conceptual toolkit, Wittgenstein like to deploy the idea of the language 'game'. This conception is worth taking a brief look at because the label 'language game' has great currency in analytic philosophy – especially amongst those in awe of Wittgenstein (and there are many such) – yet this apparent clarificatory advance in our grasping of all this philosophical is much less than it appears to be. Don't forget what we're trying to get at here – behind all the many twists and turns and Wittgensteinian conceptions - is whether or not Wittgenstein is actually telling us something significant, or merely bewitching us further. In other words, is the kind of logical positivism to which he aligned himself a meaningful – meaning accurate and informative and insightful – approach to matters metaphysical? Will it help us better understand our everyday existential and experiential predicament?

As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein came to see that the declarative strictures of the Tractatus did not really amount to a convincing destruction of all things philosophical and metaphysical, and that a more nuanced approach would likely be called for. But Wittgenstein clearly did not want to abandon the belief that logic and mathematics – and their apparently quintessential conceptual clarity and cleanliness – could somehow, given priority, destroy the sophistry and illusion of philosophical and metaphysical babblings for once and for all.

The concept of a 'language game'

And along the way to a more phenomenological and discursive approach to language, Wittgenstein formulated the conception of the 'language game'. Essentially 'language game' means 'language situation', meaning the specific context in which a choice of words is used, which essentially grants to and confers on those words and their deployment their characteristic meaning. As is widely understood, exactly the same words, given a different context, can have opposite meanings; and it is this feature of language that Wittgenstein wanted to capture in his concept of a 'game'.

He chose the label 'game' because the idea of 'a game' – in ordinary usage - is apparently vague and nebulous and highly context specific, making it hard to define in any watertight way. So describing specific instances of language use – instances of performative speech, if you like – is akin to attempting to delineate the rules of any context-specific 'game', in the sense that you always need to know the specific context in which words are used if you are to understand the meaning of the words themselves. Ordinary language usage, according to Wittgenstein, consists of instances of language games, in which we need to know the 'rules' being used if we are to understand what the words mean.

From the Philosophical Investigations:

23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command? a There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call "signs", "words", "sentences". And this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

The word "language-*game*" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

But 'game' is a very peculiar word to use to want to describe the need for a context-specific knowledge for any understanding of how certain words were, or are, used. Why 'game' ? Why not 'context', or 'instance' or 'case' or 'occasion'? Wittgenstein would argue that the concept 'game' involves and implies the idea of 'rules' by which a game is played, and other labels – such as those just mentioned – fail to incorporate the idea of 'rule-governed behaviour' in the way that the concept 'game' does.

All of which sounds great, because we're bringing in, by the back door, the ideas implied by the importance of 'rules', namely grammar, and logic, and clarifying organisational abstractions of that sort. So we appear at last to be getting somewhere in a tidying up of the messiness of everyday thinking in an ability to get well beneath the hood and to take a look at the underlying engine in all its abstract glory. Gone are the surface confusions, and in place is the bedrock of deep (quasi-logical, quasi-deterministic) grammatical structure; a concept further developed by Noam Chomsky.

Except that, if you're genuinely interested in the bald reality of how we actually think and speak, you'll see that none of this Wittgensteinian/Chomskyan conceptual 'apparatus' actually manifests itself in anything in the real world. For example, if and when we want to say something – unless it's something that requires special consideration – 'we just speak', and the relevant or irrelevant, appropriate or inappropriate words just pour out of our mouths, of their own accord, untrammelled. We don't normally check our utterances against rules or templates or anything of any kind - except of course in highly formalised occasions – we simply say whatever it is we want to say. Normal speech is really not that big a deal, in terms of its astonishingly unlimited everyday effortlessness.

Of course this is not to say that patterns cannot be detected and abstracted into grammatical systems of one kind or another, but this is a very long way from having to deploy such pattern/systems in the exercise of normal speech. And once you're familiar with a particular language – and if you're endowed with a certain creativity - you can treat everyday conversation 'improvisationally', ignoring every conceivable 'abstract rule pattern' to great effect, twisting words and grammar amazingly, yet all the while being understood by everyone. How on earth is normal speech even possible? How is it that when I want to speak, I am instantly able to, immediately, without the least hindrance? As yet, we don't have a convincing account of the relationship between the immediacy and revelatory effortlessness of ordinary speech – and any deep, rules-based structure underlying everything- and, if we want it couched in a natural scientific materialist terms, probably never will do.

It's worth just putting down a few markers here. And one of them is particularly important when it comes to our understanding of our own everyday 'ways of thinking'. Is it possible, for example, to avoid positing the notion of an unconscious set of background 'goings on' – some kind of deep structure and activity - when it comes to explaining what happens when we try to analyse ordinary existence? In other words, how do we explain the link between my here-and-now experiencing, and the feeling that this immediacy is being fed, or supplied, with information from an 'elsewhere'? It looks like we simply have to posit some kind of an 'elsewhere' – meaning an unconscious, underlying repository of unlimited 'stuff' of all kinds – if we are adequately to get an intellectual hold of experience as we experience it. It seems we have to invoke an 'off-stage' if we are to grasp our sense of 'on-stage', in exactly the same way as we have to refer to the concept of causality if we are to explain how a certain situation – of whatever kind – 'came about'.

These intellectual necessities – like the idea of an 'unconscious realm' behind the scenes and 'causality' as the only way to explain a sequence of events - then become an issue of accuracy, meaning that their characterisations have to appear to our analytical capacities to be 'accurate' and 'true' if we are to accept them as convincing explanations of how we arrive at our experiential facticity. And in an odd way, having to present things in this way says more about the limitations of our intellectual capacities – and our philosophical/theoretical constructs – than it does about the verisimilitude of our accounts of how we normally 'experience our experiencing'.

But where are we going, with all this? The idea here is to bring to light, as far as is necessary, the key conception that motivated Wittgenstein to pursue his particular angle on language, underpinned as it is/was by the idea that explicating the workings of language will, at the same time, explicate the 'mechanisms' – ie the conceptual principles - of our thoughts, and intellects, and theoretical constructs. In other words, a close study of the communicative apparatus of language – especially with regard to the nuances of context-specific 'meaning' - will reveal the secrets of our 'ways of thinking', because they are inextricably linked to the words we use to formulate – and communicate - our thoughts. So the 'house of language' becomes, as it were - to the alert and perspicacious philosopher- the royal road to an understanding of all things intellectual, philosophical, metaphysical and theoretical. It's an enticing prospect.

But it all goes back to the 'scientism' – the belief that a natural scientific-type materialist 'objectivity' is crucial to unlocking anything and everything philosophical – as the most appropriate prejudicial template to apply to the supposedly 'big questions' of life and existence. And as it turns out, these big questions, when subject to the strictures of logical positivist scientism, turn out to be pseudo-questions; which means that, as essentially no more than instances of intellectual 'bewitchment', are questions which lacked any real substance to begin with.

So we progress from the declarative crypto-materialism of the Tractatus – 'The world is all that is the case' – through 'language games' and the idea of philosophical difficulties as language 'bewitchment', to what has been charaterised by Daniele Moyal-Sharrock as the '3rd Wittgenstein', as represented in his 'On Certainty'.

The key idea in 'On Certainty' has been trumpeted as a conceptual breakthrough, but in fact is as conceptually as old as the hills. Basically it's a distant cousin to the idea that denying the existence of something can, under certain circumstances, imply the existence of the very thing you are seeking to deny. So if, for example, you claim not to know what genuine 'certainty' would amount to, you are in a way implying that you already know exactly what its criteria would be, otherwise how could you be denying it?

Put differently, our present conceptualisations – whatever they might be – depend for their sensicality – their ordinary meaningfulness - on a prior acceptance of things which supposedly – according to Wittgenstein and his supporters – are not open to the kind of conceptual uncertainties that one might invoke for the sake of a discussion, or an argument.

And Wittgenstein described and labelled these paradoxical implications underlying any type of discussion about 'certainty' – or about anything else, for that matter - as 'hinge' conceptualisations, meaning that the conceptualisations under discussion hinged – ie 'depended' – on the prior acceptance of conceptualisations which were not themselves open to meaningful doubt; and so in this way therefore resolving the problem of what constitutes 'certainty' by implication, and so effectively arriving at a kind of instrumentally underpinned existential 'certainty' by an intellectual backward somersault.

'Oh no!' the Wittgensteinian apologist will argue 'You've misunderstood the important implications this has for our ordinary understanding of language' etc etc. But they're only important if you subscribe – that is to say, believe in the whole project as an act of faith – in the positivist scientism underpinning the whole undertaking, in the same way as these supposedly crucial hinge conceptualisations apparently permit you to try to deny ideas which you've already accepted.

Wittgenstein would see his characterisation of hinge concepts – those prior underpinnings – as a good example of philosophy in action, letting the buzzing philosophical fly out of the bottle, and so showing us how silly we were not to see the pseudo-problem for what it was to begin with. We were 'certain' all along! We only confused ourselves with our uncertain imaginings, and bewitched ourselves with words we did not fully see for what they were.

Ontological 'uncertainty'

Unfortunately this is not what the quest for 'certainty' – philosophical or any other kind - is all about, except in the hands of those who've allowed themselves to be bewitched by positivism and the like. Conceptual clarification has its value, but it can't resolve the problems of ontology unless, of course, one has confused 'words and ideas' with the things they refer to.

What does this mean? We have to go back to the beginning of this article, and take another look at what we believe the problem of 'certainty' to be. As normal people, we all subscribe to – meaning 'believe in' - a type of operational certainty, in which we ascribe to objects and events a measure of reliable solidity, which in turn allows us to behave and plan and respond to things without having to double-check on everything all the time. We come to expect the landscape of our lives to be more or less predictable, given normal circumstances.

But when it comes to our ideas of ourselves, we enter a realm of great ambivalence, in which we can find it impossible to anchor ourselves with the kind of certainty and reliability and predictability with which we interact with the external, physical world. This leads to a kind of ongoing inner perplexity that we are forced to negotiate – meaning 'deal with' – one way or another. Strategies for negotiating our thoughts are well known, stretching from 'self-help books' to orthodox religions and scholarly philosophies. We try to organise our ideas as best we can, hoping, in the process, to resolve – or at least, ameliorate – the sense of anxiety that tends to accompany 'uncertainty and doubt'. And to the extent that any set of ideas affords us reassurance – however temporary – we will tend to want to cling to them. This is the basis, amongst other things, of the phenomenon of religious and philosophical 'faith and belief'.

Now it's important to be accurate about what we're talking about here. 'Doubt' and 'uncertainty' are both conceptions – meaning abstract representations of the things they represent – as well as actual phenomena – meaning states and frames of mind we experience as actualities in our lives, irrespective of any abstract conceptions we may have of them. It's the experience itself in its raw state that's important; not so much any later conception, although conceptualising can play a key role in enhancing or diminishing the qualitative aspects of our experiencing.

So when we're talking about 'uncertainty' or 'certainty' as 'experiences' – meaning as underlying senses or apperceptions accompanying ideas or perceptual events – we are referring in the first instance not to mere abstractions, but instead to concrete perceptions or apperceptions in the 'matrix' – meaning the realm - of our experiencing. These are ontological states – basic, irreducible actualities – that we use and refer to in our everyday experiencing to tell us, in a very elemental way, 'what's going on' with ourselves and others and our place in the world. In other words, if we want to know how we feel – or sense, or experience – where we are at any one time – whether we're happy or sad, frightened or confident, calm or anxious – and so on, indefinitely, we refer to these elemental perceptions, or elemental experiential frames of mind.

Now having identified various ontological states of being, as it were, as the bedrock of our experiential existences, we can then, as directed by our predilections, set about trying to optimise our experience of life, or, to put it more bluntly, our experience of experience. We are all hardwired to strive to optimise – according to our capacity for understanding the situations we are in – our encounter with our experiencing of life, in all its aspects. We then respond to the opportunities that we believe are crucial to this optimisation, though of course our understanding of exactly what it is that is bothering us at any one time can change drastically over the years. Adolescent worries are not adult worries; and mid-life

crises are not the concern of the elderly. And so on. This is all reasonably straightforward and uncontentious.

So why do we concern ourselves with the concept – and the actuality – of an experience, or a sense, or a meaning, called 'certainty'? What makes it an important avenue for exploration? Well, going back to what was said in the opening paragraphs of this article, it's the idea that if we hapless human beings could find a way to ground our conceptions of things on some kind of indisputable facticity, we could then proceed to 'move forward' and engage constructively with experience such that we could optimise – to the nth degree – whatever it was that we wanted to. Philosophical certainty – assuming that we could be confident of its indisputable validity - would afford us this bedrock, and all else would likely follow.

(As an interesting metaphysical aside, it's worth asking ourselves if we can be 'sure' that 'certainty' – should we somehow mysteriously be able to achieve it – would deliver the goods we seem to think it will. Might we not then hanker back for the good old days of 'doubt'? What makes us think that 'certainty' is all it's cracked up to be? And what exactly is it that it's 'cracked up' to be?)

But as has already been implied, ontological uncertainty – meaning the experience of uncertainty, no matter what the facts in front of us – is not a linguistic, conceptual matter; it's an ontological experience, meaning that it's a 'state of being' – a perception - not a mere 'thought', and it can manifest itself and undermine certainty in every conceivable instance, extending in an infinite regress. In other words, no amount of conceptual clarification can resolve an experience which is not itself a mere conception. You can always be uncertain of any amount of certainty.

As it is, we all know that when it comes to the actual 'living of life', our uncertainties and anxieties often have to take second place to the need for action, and the need to make decisions, however ill-informed. Because life is such that if our desire for complete certainty precluded just getting on with things, we would often be stuck in a kind of permanent limbo. Which means in turn that, in a strange way, Wittgenstein was right to allude to the fact that experience itself compels us to engage with life despite the fact that, at any one time, we might not have a clear idea what our certainties (and best options) are. In other words, any present 'uncertainty' hinges on a prior series of 'operational certainties'; and whether or not we can achieve conceptual clarity, we are already acting as if we were in possession of it.

This leads us on to another aspect of the phenomenology (meaning objective description) of experience that unfortunately Wittgenstein – in his inability to break free of analytic positivism – failed to notice. And it is the fact that ordinary experiencing – as we ordinarily experience it – is always amazingly revelatory and self-explanatory. It presents itself to us as a completed totality, no matter what the specific content of that totality might be. The fact is, we don't have to construct experiential immediacy out of off-stage repositories of language and perception and memory and meaning and grammar and whatever else: it's given to us right now all 'in one go'. Ordinary experience not only reveals itself to us, it also reveals us to ourselves. But this is a complex topic for another day.

What can we conclude from all this? Basically that 'conceptual' and 'ontological' certainties and uncertainties are of a wholly separate and different order of categorical magnitude, and that conceptual clarification does not, and cannot, of its own, put to bed to the possibility of the experience of ontological uncertainty. Ontological uncertainty – as a very real apperception – is always a possibility, and can always arrive out of nowhere and undermine any set of apparently irrefutable facts. How is this possible? Because ontological uncertainty has nothing to do with the conceptual clarifications and convictions born of faith in one philosophical ideology or another. 'Uncertainty' is an elemental apperception, beyond the control of the willed intellect. Even a simple question such as 'Do I exist right now?' can, as soon as you start to look at it, begin to present itself as deeply uncertain, and there isn't a single aspect of the 'experiential here-and-now' which can be grounded for once and for all in anything approaching certainty. And even this primordial uncertainty is itself uncertain. It's a binary forever located in an infinite experiential regress.

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