

Communicating certainty and uncertainty in everyday life: An introduction

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Abstract

This introduction focuses on the relevance of certainty and uncertainty in social life. We will firstly underscore the structuring role of certainties as it was outlined by the phenomenological approach to the life-world in the first half of the XX century. Drawing on the bottom-up perspective advanced by the interactionist turn in social sciences, we then consider how people routinely (re)construct these certainties in ordinary life through their everyday mundane practices. To empirically illustrate how certainties are - at the same time - presupposed and constituted in everyday communication, we analyze two examples of child/adult interaction. By illuminating some consequences of building upon unquestionable certainties, we raise the issue of uncertainty as a relevant modality in and for everyday life. In the discussion we contend that far from being proper to the philosopher's attitude as former phenomenology put it, uncertainty and doubt are – or at least may be - the tools for everyday rational and ethical thinking. Finally we present the articles collected in this issue that represents a collective effort to explore the territories of certainty and uncertainty and the relevance the management of epistemics has in social interaction.

Keywords: beliefs, certainties, children socialization, everyday life, language and social interaction, moral and epistemic stances, phenomenology

The need for certainty, the value of uncertainty: perspectives from the phenomenology of everyday life

According to the phenomenology of the social world developed in the first half of the XXth century, certainty is the core epistemic modality of our everyday life.

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As Schutz pointed out, the layperson in his or her mundane attitude does not bracket the certainty that the world is as it appears to be, “what [rather] he puts in brackets is the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears to him” (Schutz, 1962, p.229). The bracketing of certainties that - according to Husserl - is typical of the philosopher’s attitude is not the layperson’s ordinary epistemic stance: in our everyday understanding and everyday activities, we build and rely on certainty much more than on doubt for acting and interacting in an accountable, understandable, and culturally appropriated way and for constructing and nourishing our sense of belonging to a community.

The certainties phenomenologists refer to are not so much those that derive from a rational processing and assessment of a proposition (“line of thought”, Wittgenstein, 1969, §103) nor are they evidence-based certainties; rather, they are *these* “(self)evidencies” (Schutz & Luckman, 1973, p. 8), a repertoire of taken-for-granted notions, assumptions, representations of reality that we do not question nor discuss. As Wittgenstein put it (Wittgenstein, 1969, see Boncompagni, this issue), they are the hinges of our daily actions, interactions and decisions: “[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (§341, italics in original); “we just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put” (§343, italics in original).

The root and even the possibility for everyday practical reasoning, decision-making and social interaction in the life-world is the so-called “natural¹ attitude” (Husserl, 1983[1913]; 1970 [1954]). Indeed, the practicability of these activities relies on shared truths and certainties that the individual in the natural attitude assumes and takes for granted without necessarily *knowing that* they are taken-for-granted. As Wittgenstein put it, we do not consciously reach an “unshakeable conviction” “by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my *questions and answers*, so anchored that I cannot touch it” (Wittgenstein, 1969, §103, italics in the original). In synthesis, the life-world which constitutes the horizon of daily life (Husserl, (1970 [1954]) is a world-taken-for-granted, self evident and given to our epistemic and practical activities (see Schutz, 1953). It is at the same time depicted in and constituted by a web of “of course statements”, i.e. “statements about the world to which most people would respond by saying, “Of course” (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009, p. 26).

Among the basic certainties and unshakeable convictions we live by, the most widespread is perhaps the more problematic one, at least from the philosopher’s point of view: the correspondence between knowledge and reality, between the map and the territory, between the way we represent the world and the world as it

is. As Marconi, drawing on Grice's maxim of quality, affirms: if we doubted the truthfulness of each and any of our interlocutors' statement, our everyday life would be very complicated (Marconi, 2007, p. 139).

Interestingly enough, this repertoire of cultural hinges, premises, frames and taken-for-granted certainties is not a metaphysical world or a cultural structure determining people's actions, thinking and ways of live. On the contrary, these certainties are constantly built and rebuilt, enacted and (re)instantiated by people in and through their daily activities and mundane interactions. We owe to the interactionist turn in social sciences deep insight into how we contribute to building this world of certainties that – at the same time – shapes our daily life and makes it possible and accountable.

From symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1967[1934]; Goffman, 1969) to ethnomethodology and social studies of everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967; de Certeau, 1980), from conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1968; 1987) to the so-called “return to practice” (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001), scholars interested in the practical and communicative constitution of reality have contended and empirically shown the emergence of structure (e.g. roles, status, identities but also knowledge and cultural canons) from everyday practices. These bottom-up perspectives conceive people as involved in (re)constructing order, structure, and identities but also their epistemologies and ontologies, in and through the design of their practical course of action, and on the micro-order of their everyday life (Cooren, 2010; Heritage, 2011; Taylor & Van Every, 2011).

Although some contemporary emergency perspectives run the risk of radical situationalism (see the notion of *interactional reductionsim*, Levinson, 2005) and therefore clearly deviate from the phenomenology program, the interactionist turn basically underlines that knowledge and praxis, structure and action create each other (Giddens, 1984; 1991).

It is precisely because we act and interact according to the premises and certainties that make up our life-world and because we take them for granted and build on them that we ratify them and participate in constructing and solidifying what Max Scheler (1926) called our relative-natural world view. Self-evidencies pertaining to the natural attitude are given as unquestionable, yet their unquestionability is also produced by the fact that social actors behave as if these evidencies did not need to be examined as regards their validity (Schutz & Luckman, 1973, p. 8). As Garfinkel put it, some and often very strong cultural premises and self-evident certainties (e.g. children visiting parents at parents' home are “at home”; the price of a bus fare is nonnegotiable; in absence of any particular markers, “how is she feeling” means how is she feeling, Garfinkel, 1967) orient and even allow people's everyday ordered interaction. But, and recursively, these premises

are also ordinarily created, maintained and (re)instantiated for “another next first time” (Garfinkel, 1992, p.186; 2002, p. 92) each time the individuals act accordingly and use them to make sense of their surrounding world. Harvey Sacks’ seminal work on the analyzability of stories by children (Sacks, 1972) is perhaps one of the most convincing demonstrations of how these kinds of certainties are - at the same time - constituted *and* presupposed, assumed as shared *and* ratified by the members of a community “to order their affair” (Sacks, 1984, p.24) and produce an accountable version of the world.

By looking at the micro-order of everyday activities, scholars in the stream of phenomenology add to the former phenomenology of everyday life a crucial dimension: without underestimating the shaping role played by the given-as-unquestionable certainties, they also show how these certainties are routinely embodied in, enacted and therefore implemented by the ways people carry on and order their practices (not necessarily, nor always discursive).

As we mentioned above, certainty is a necessary epistemic modality for many if not most of our daily activities; consequently, there are many contexts and circumstances in everyday life where communication of certainty is deployed, expected and therefore analyzable. To further explore and empirically illustrate what we call “the need for certainty” in everyday life, we have selected a specific social phenomenon: child socialization.) In particular, we will consider the communicative constitution of certainties which takes place in daily discourses, dialogues and interactions that naturally occur and punctuate children’s everyday life in the family. Interactions between adults and children are indeed very interesting phenomena to analyze as they magnify some crucial properties of communication in ordinary as well as institutional contexts (see the seminal work on “learning the truth” by Dupret, 2011). More specifically, adult-child interactions illustrate, in an unparalleled way, how cultural knowledge (e.g. certainties on how things are or should be), worldviews and discursive practices create each other (Ochs, 1988).

In the next sessions we will analyze two very different cases of adult-child interaction: the first one is a naturally occurring conversation recorded during an ethnography; the second one is part of a reported life-story gathered during an autobiographical study on growing up in a country where the Racial Laws were in force. Although they are not comparable instances and require different analytical approaches, they both illustrate how and to what extent children are socialized in the certainties that constitute their life-world through those everyday interactions that hinge on these certainties.

Building on and constructing certainties through everyday practices: the case of children’s socialization

Since the work of John Bowlby (1969; 1973, 1988), scholars in developmental psychology and education, but also lay persons and professional caregivers have learned to think about the value of providing children with a secure base for their healthy development: children supposedly need to believe that at least some features of their material, social and affective world remain consistently the same over time. They need some certainties (i.e. a dependable secure base) to build self-confidence, to explore the world around them, to smoothly integrate strangeness and novelties with the feeling that the basics of this world will remain the same and that, anytime they need, they can return to their safe haven. Security is the emotional side of certainty: from a cognitive point of view this feeling depends on “being certain of” a specific state of affairs. When caregivers and significant adults fail in communicating this certainty to young children in their holding, handling and object presenting roles (Winnicott, 1958[1945]; 1965), their emotional, social and cognitive development may be affected in unsuitable ways. Yet, even beyond the famous crucial first years, a large part of the socialization process still consists in providing children with certainties about how things are or should be. As Wittgenstein (1969) put it: “As children we learn facts; [...] and we take them on trust (§159); “the child learns by believing the adult. Doubts comes after belief “ (§160).

Thanks to the language socialization paradigm (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and the phenomenology of education (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011) it has been possible to theoretically claim and empirically show that children “learn facts” in and through everyday communication. In talking to children about events, activities, artifacts and people, adults take a stance (Du Bois, 1997): they situate these “objects of discourse” within the web of principles, values, and certainties (concerning how the world naturally is or normatively should be) that constitute their culture. Children are socialized into these stances through their participation in those unplanned micro-level interactions where certainties are (re)constructed and shared day by day, one interaction at a time.

The cognitive and normative definitions of the world that mediate the encounter between the children and the reality out there are rarely stated as such by the adults: more often they are enacted in the ways adults talk and interact with children about something, and in what adults *do* through their ways of talking (and even not talking) to children’s about something. When children are given advice and instructions on how to use a tool, when parents formulate rules and give their

2	R-O	<p>be non mi rispondi neanche? aren't you even going to answer me?</p>
3	O-R	<p>harry potter ((in a curt and abrupt tone of voice, showing her the cover))</p>
4	Mo-R	<p>le farei un monumento a lei lì, Olivia</p>
5		<p>non si stacca più dal libro,= I would build a monument in her honour, Olivia can't put the book down,</p>
6		<p>=non fa altro che leggere li ha letti</p>
7		<p>=tutti in un mese = she does nothing else but reading she has read them all in one month</p>
8		<p>= me li devo leggere anch'io per capire</p>
9		<p>come scrive,= I have to read them too, to know how she writes,</p>
10		<p>=deve essere un genio quella she must be a genius</p>
11	R-Mo	<p>lei l'ha trovato il modo per fare i miliardi she found the way to make millions</p> <p>((M. watches the exchange))</p>

In 1 the adult turns around and asks Olivia what she is reading. The adult's turn is clearly designed as the first part of a canonical adjacency pair (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). It is designed as a question, clearly identifies who the next speaker is and, therefore, makes the occurrence of an answer by the addressee relevant. Olivia does not reply. This absence of reply is typically considered an "official absence" (Schegloff, 1968) by the adult first speaker and, not surprisingly, is strongly repaired (2). The adult frames the behaviour (not even answering the question) as inappropriate. Note that the mother does not intervene. Forced by the adult to provide an answer to the first question, the girl (3) shows the cover of the book, states part of the title and she quickly returns to her main activity: reading. The intonation used to pronounce the two main words of the title, abrupt and curt, is a resource to indicate the imminent closing of the interaction opened up by the adult in 1. In 4 the mother takes the turn where she basically accounts for and justifies³ her daughter's behaviour. In this extended turn of talk, she builds an argument in favour of their daughter's be-

behaviour by making references to the book, the activity of reading and - two times - to the author of the novel. The way she convokes these three actants and makes them play a role in the scene of dialogue (Cooren, 2010) is a complex rhetorical strategy through which she constructs book reading as an unproblematic activity. Firstly, she juxtaposes two pieces of information: “I’d like to build a monument in her honour”, “Olivia can’t put the book down” (4 and 5). Having written a book her daughter is unable to put down is designed as an extremely valuable action: the writer deserves a monument for this. Although the causal link between the information is not linguistically marked, we (as the participants) can easily understand that the mother would build a monument to the writer *because* her daughter doesn’t stop reading the book. In this instance of hyperbolic talk, the mother determines who is responsible for her daughter’s behaviour (the writer), defines this actor as someone deserving a monument and, therefore, legitimizes her daughter’s behaviour. If the cause of compulsive reading is assigned value, for the transitive property, compulsive reading is assessed as a legitimate and extremely valuable behaviour.

The argument is clarified by the next two pieces of information: “she does nothing else but read, she read them all in one month” (6 and 7). These behaviours are designed as further consequences of the same cause (reading the books written by an author who deserves a monument) and, therefore, they are incorporated in the same positive evaluation. The positive assessment of the actual behaviour (Olivia can’t put down the book she is reading here and now) is generalized to “doing nothing but reading”. The closure of the account - she has to be a genius, (10) - retrospectively reinforces the argument: if the writer whose books keep children reading deserves a monument and is a genius, then unlimited book reading is good, valuable and even desirable.

Through this extended and unrequested turn, the mother carries out two crucial actions: she legitimises and even hyper-appreciates Olivia’s actual behaviour and she frames unlimited reading as a good and appropriate activity.

This valorisation of book reading is also accomplished by an instance of what Mehan (1979) defined as the “work of doing nothing”. As noticed above, the mother doesn’t repair her daughter’s silence after the question, nor does she intervene in supporting the first speaker’s repair of this behaviour. To interpret this instance of “doing nothing” it is worth making reference to ethnographic background knowledge: children in this family are routinely socialized to behave as acceptable moral beings. Basic politeness rules governing how to make a request, how to receive something or how to behave with adults are routinely evoked by the mother when her children’s behaviour appears not to follow them. When the children are viewing television or they are playing videogames and they do not answer an adult’s calling, this absence of reply is sanctioned. When reading is at

stake, politeness rules seem to be suspended: not repairing Olivia's silence is a way to legitimise the absence of reply. Olivia may not answer a question and carry on the activity of reading, ignoring the adult's attempt to divert her attention toward another vector of activity.

Second, this specific media activity – book reading – does not become an object of negotiation between the mother and her daughter: being glued to the book is not a debatable affair, nor a candidate topic for a transaction (e.g. the girl doesn't ask for permission⁴). It simply happens; it does not need to be requested or justified. Briefly it is a *non accountable action*: both the mother and the daughter share and take it for granted that you can never read too much.

The other adult, who is not a member of the family, exhibits a different attitude in the way she receives the little girl's silence: she repairs the absence of reply after the question and, therefore, she treats "continuing to read" as an inappropriate behaviour (at least in this circumstance). Her intervention makes the mother's account relevant (4-10.). In this extended turn book reading became an object of discourse. Yet the official addressee of the account is the adult, not the daughter (Olivia is a character of the account not the recipient, 4 and 6). If the "work of doing nothing" normalizes the child's behaviour (continuing to read even when adults ask her a question), the account provides the unfamiliar adult with the motives of such a normalisation: you can never read too much.

In this account the mother assigns value to the objects of discourse (i.e. books and reading) and positions herself with respect to these assessed objects. In short, she takes a stance. As Du Bois put it (2007), stancetaking "always invokes, explicitly or implicitly, presupposed systems of sociocultural value while at the same time contributing to the enactment and reproduction of those values" (p.173). Although the children are not the official recipients of the account, they participate in the event as an overhearing audience. They are audience of the discursive work through which their mother constructs, validates and maintains a piece of a traceable media ideology: unlimited reading as an unproblematic, hyper-valorised activity.

Certainties that organize talk, talk that constructs certainties

As the language socialization paradigm put it (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Ochs, 1988), children are socialized through the use of language-in-everyday-interactions to the habits and worldviews of their culture (Garrett and Baquedano-López, 2002). Beliefs, cultural values but also the morality of (certain) daily activities, as well as certainties on what is right and what is wrong organize and, at the

same time, are organized by local talk. Certainties about how the world is or normatively should be become frames of reference available for children whether they are ratified participants of daily talk or simply bystanders and overhearing. Conversely, it is also because family members behave according to this set of rules and ideas and use them to “order their affairs” (Sacks, 1984 a, p. 24) that they acquire existence and relevance. Shared certainties, collective ideas on what is right and what is wrong, safe or dangerous, preferred or dispreferred are (re)produced, maintained and practically constructed each time they are evoked and each time actual praxis exhibits an orientation to them.

Consider the extent to which the specific media ideology of this family sounds familiar and even “obvious”. Although for mainstream contemporary western parents it is normal and even natural that reading is never too much, the idea of literature as a safe cultural object is totally cultural and far from being universal. As Sacks (1984 b) pointed out, the very question facing research on ordinary life is not “what is normal” but “how such normality is constructed” in ordinary life. Indeed, it is in and through everyday social interactions that normality is constructed. In the example above, the mother’s moves are informed by the ‘obvious’ principle that “reading is good and right”. Yet, at the same time, these moves *construct* this underlying assumption as obvious and give it an aura of unquestioned normality, in that they confirm, naturalize, and literally objectivise what is nothing more than a socially constructed and historically situated definition of “literature”.

The canonization of reading as a valuable activity and of reading as a safe cultural object as well as the obviousness of such ideas are based on the micro-order of social interactions and emerge in and from the members’ everyday practices. By talking–in–interaction and taking a stance toward what they are talking about, family members construct and maintain, dialogue after dialogue, one turn after another, the value system, moral order and the canons of the larger community they belong to. Micro and ordinary interactions like these participate in the silent and almost invisible process in and through which individuals create their cultural world as a quasi-natural one.

As we will show in the next session, the social and language-based process through which the members of this family reproduce certainties that sound natural and even suitable for us is the same process that produces or may produce other (less suitable?) “natural worlds”.

“Because she is Jewish”: parents’ epistemic stance in talking to children

The class of statements that have a “certainty quality” for most people (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009) is extremely wide. It includes the famous factual statements, i.e. statements that convey propositions that can be empirically proved, such as “water wets” or “fire burns”. Factual statements are generally evoked to argue in favor of the truth-as-correspondence criterion (Ferraris, 2011), the non questionability of some types of knowledge of the world and the fact that we generally consider it reasonable to live as if these statements were true (Marconi, 2007). Yet, the class of statements that have a “certainty quality” also includes other types of statements that have the strange property of referring to constructed “social facts” (Searle, 1995) while at the same time contributing to constituting, ratifying and solidifying them as “facts”. In these cases, seemingly pure constative and declarative statements work, inherently, as performative statements as they ratify (and therefore contribute to constituting) the existence and relevance of the reality they refer to.

During a long autobiographical account, a woman in her eighties remembers the following episode.

In the late ‘30s she lived in a town in Tuscany where she attended the public elementary school. Suddenly, her best friend Estherina stopped coming to school. Surprised, the young girl asked her mother why Estherina wasn’t coming to school anymore and her mother replied “in a natural way, as if it were obvious”: “because she is Jewish”. After telling me this story, the old woman dwelled upon some biographical details of her family that made her exclude any kind of ideological anti-Semitism on her parents’ side: having moved to Rome, her father used the trunk of his car to help some Jews escape and hide in the countryside far from the city. Later on, the survivors’ descendants proposed her father as a candidate for the award “Righteous Among the Nations”. What retrospectively astonished the old woman was precisely that “not attending the school any more because Jewish” was something taken for granted and self-evident⁵.

Although reported, the interaction between this girl and her mother illustrates the crucial role commonsensical certainties have in framing our ways of making sense and interpreting the world. Like the hinges identified by Wittgenstein, they open and close possibilities for understanding; they scaffold our thinking and decision-making but are rarely called into question. It also illustrates how they acquire or consolidate their “world-picture” quality (Wittgenstein, 1969, §95) precisely be-

cause they are used to build explanations and to support interpretation. Interestingly enough, this “world-picture quality” is the very dimension made relevant by the old woman when telling me this story seventies years later. However, the ordinariness of the event (Estherina does not come to school because she is Jewish) puts forth a methodological issue. As Sacks pointed out, “a kind of remarkable thing is how, in ordinary conversation, people in reporting on some event report what we might see to be, not what happened, but the ordinariness of what happened. The reports do not so much give attributes of the scene, activity, participants but announce the event’s ordinariness, its usualness” (Sacks, 1984 b: 414). Did the original speaker announce the event as ordinary? Or is it the actual speaker who reports her mother’s original words as if they conveyed the usualness of what happened? As analysts, we cannot but assume that the ordinariness of the event is unpredictably distributed between the main speaker of the reported conversation (the mother) and the speaker who reports the conversation she participated in seventy years before (the daughter).

The mother’s (reported) explanation builds on a first (para)factual statement: “she is Jewish” refers to Estherina being a Jew, a typically socially constructed fact. This fact (being Jewish) is used as an *explanans* to make sense of the *explanandum* (i.e. the absence of Estherina from school) and, in turn, it doesn’t need to be explained as such. The mother’s statement corresponded to a “reality out there” which supposedly rendered perfectly understandable and obvious why Estherina didn’t attend the school. Yet, the mother’s explanation builds upon another (para)factual statement that, in those times, was also tragically true (i.e. its proposition corresponded to a state of affair) : when the racial laws were in force, Italian Jews were not allowed to attend public schools or universities and, therefore, many of them ceased to attend the school *because* they were Jewish. Indubitably the mother’s statement evoked and even corresponded to a reality out there, the one socially constructed by the racial laws. On the basis of its (constructed) factual counterparts, the idea that “Jewish people do not attend or should not attend public schools *qua* Jewish” was part of these certainties about the world that were obvious, taken for granted and commonsensical for most people living in an Italian town at the end of the ‘30s. In this example at least, this certainty scaffolds the mother’s reply to her daughter. By using it as a hinge to make sense of one single event, the mother also ratifies the existence and relevance of a couple of unquestioned/able facts: Estherina was Jewish and Jews do not attend public schools. As her daughter remembered more than seventy years later, certainty was the epistemic stance taken by her mother in talking to her about her friend Estherina. For her mother and for her at that time, this was as obvious as the fact that “water wets”. If the old woman had asked her mother why she shouldn’t put her hands in the

fireplace, her mother would probably have answered: “because fire burns”, with the same tone of unquestioned normality with which that day she explained why her daughter’s friend didn’t attend school because she was Jewish.

Although different, both cases analyzed so far illustrate how children are socialized in the “relative-natural worldview” (Scheleer, 1926) of their community through daily micro-interactions and even through those “small phenomena” (Sacks, 1984, p.24) (e.g. the tone of voice) by which adults communicate their epistemic modalities and, therefore, assign a mode of existence to what they are talking about: hypothetical, questionable or, as in the cases above, obvious.

Both interactions also illustrate the process through which certainties and everyday practices create each other: ordinary practices are framed by a web of unquestioned premises according to which individuals make sense of reality; yet, at one and the same time, they routinely ratify these premises precisely because they use them to account for the reality and because they do not question them. If they did, their daily life would become “very complicated” (Marconi, 2007). Perhaps it will. Yet – as the case of Estherina illustrates - living and acting according to the obviousness of what goes without saying doesn’t seem to have less complicated consequences.

In praise of doubt⁶: the value of uncertainty

Child socialization is a magnifying glass: it helps in focusing on the pervasiveness of certainties and the crucial role the natural attitude plays in making our daily life not only accountable and sharable but also, and primarily, possible. Yet it also sheds light on the possible value of uncertainty in everyday life. According to the phenomenological tradition, doubt is the peculiar modality of the “philosopher’s attitude” (Schutz, 1962; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; see also the notion of phenomenological attitude, Husserl, 1983[1913]): it consists in bracketing the mundane certainty that things are as they appear to be, in exploring what and who makes us think that things are as they are, and in systematically exploring the hypothesis that they could be otherwise (see the notion of *eidetic variation*, Husserl, 1969 [1929/1931], pp. 70-72, and 1983 [1913], pp.50-51 cit. in Levin, 1999, p. 85). However, adopting this stance is typical of the philosopher and the social scientist because for the layperson “what is merely given as questionable in the novelty of each current experience is, in the routine flow of experiences in the natural attitude, routinely made into something taken for granted [...] The succession of experiences in the natural attitude typically forms a chain of self-evidencies” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 10).

Since Plato's myth of the cavern, the skeptical stance has been considered a privileged path to move from *doxa* to *episteme*, a necessary tool to construct knowledge of the world, conceived as opposed to lived-as-natural experience (or acquaintance) and distinguished from folk beliefs and laypersons' biased understanding. From Francis Bacon's claim against the *idola* to Descartes' methodological doubt, from Peirce's conception of doubt as the very starting point of inquiry (Peirce, 1940/1955; see also Meyers, 1967) to Husserl's notion of epoké (abstaining from acceptance, Husserl, 1983[1913]; 1969[1929/1931]), and John Dewey's claims on "the importance of uncertainty" (Dewey, 1910, p. 9), we cultivated the meta-belief that - once nourished by doubts - reflective thinking can take us from the realm of belief to the realm of justifiable knowledge.

Science is the typical "province of meaning" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 22 -25) where theoretical reasoning is at stake and where a second order certain knowledge - raised from doubts and nourished by questioning - is expected (yet also discursively crafted, see Caronia, 2011b). Certainties issued from the natural attitude or from the philosophical attitude can even be the same from a propositional point of view (i.e. infants need a secure base for their healthy development; reading is a suitable activity) yet the latter supposedly rise from the use of *uncertainty* as a methodological tool.

If doubt, then, is the philosopher's or the scientist's tool, is the layperson condemned to first-order unquestionable certainties? Are we normatively blinded by the taken-for-granted truths that constitute our life-world? Should those hinges necessarily remain invisible for us to efficiently work as hinges (see Boncompagni in this issue)? Or at some point, can the assumptions and premises that frame our way of thinking-in-the-life-world be questioned or at least noticed?

Rethinking relativism and evoking "anti anti-relativism" (Geertz, 1984), Berger and Zijderveld (2009) recently illustrated the possibility and even the value of uncertainty in and for everyday practical reasoning. Drawing on the phenomenology of everyday life, they contend that looking for certainties as well as relying on certainties, indubitable truths and unproblematic assertions have clear advantages as to carrying on everyday life: they reduce the (cognitive, emotional and moral) torment of choice, grant the "limited responsibility" implied in acting according to a protocol and maximize the smooth fluidity of everyday interaction. However, as the story about Estherina illustrates, the costs are not irrelevant. Ignoring the friction (Gargani, 1987) between knowledge and reality, trusting the taken-for-granted "assertions as to what the world is and as to what it should be" (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009, p.27) can imply transforming them into "absolutes". As the Latin root (*absolutus*) indicates, absolute means untied or released. Certainties within the

life-world are definitions of reality supposedly independent of any speaking subject and uttering circumstances.

Uncertainty and doubts are the relativizing tools that may make us realize and recognize the frames, premises and hinges affecting what we know, think, decide and how we act. This does not necessarily imply a paralysis of everyday reasoning, decision-making, acting and even judging from a moral stance. On the contrary, as uncertainty makes visible the underlying premises for claiming facts as facts, it forces us to choose. In so doing, uncertainty makes relevant the adoption of a moral stance.

Relativization (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009, p. 26) as opposed to naturalization, doesn't necessary lead to or imply "moral relativism" or the postmodern nihilistic stance according to which "everything is acceptable" (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009, p.87). Relativization is a cognitive process and an epistemic attitude, not a moral one. It consists in knowing *that* the statements about how the world is or should be depend upon and are rooted in some conceptual schemata (see Husserl's intentional acts), and in acknowledging the "of course character of statements" (ibidem, p. 27) as well as the unquestioned nature of certainties that constitute the horizon of our life-world. Using uncertainty and doubt as tools for everyday understanding is not a matter of renouncing knowing, acting, taking decisions and judging; it is a matter of being able to trace the premises and think about the frames within which we think, act, explain and take decisions (Sclavi, 2000).

The fact that the so-called natural attitude *mainly* relies on certainties does not mean *eo ipso* that certainty is the only modality available within the "thinking in the life-world" (as it seems to be for the phenomenological approach to everyday life, see Schutz & 1973, p.8). As Michael Billig (1985; 1987) pointed out in discussing other properties of everyday reasoning (e.g. the supposed unavoidability of generalization and stereotyping in everyday understanding), language can be used and actually is used to generalize or to singularize, to categorize and typify or to argue about idiosyncratic cases. In a similar vein, we suggest that language can be used to (re)solidify certainties *within* the "natural attitude" (as in the examples analyzed above) or to modify this attitude and direct thinking toward the premises or hinges that make us see the world as we see it. We are not necessarily led by our certainties even when we act as laypersons: we may or may not take for granted what is taken-for-granted, we may see and make sense of the world *within* our given cultural frames or analyze the frames within which we think as well; we may ask – as the philosopher outlined by Husserl does - what and moreover who makes us think what we think, or stay within the comfort zone of believing that knowledge corresponds to reality. This is a choice, and where there is choice there is responsibility.

Interestingly enough, this is more than wishful thinking or a new appeal to the risks implied in “the comforting gift of renewed absolutes” (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009, p. 46).

As Duranti (2009) pointed out, “what we have been socialized to think, feel, and do has become part of what Husserl called ‘the natural attitude’ ” (p. 220) and therefore it may be extremely difficult to bracket it and engage in “eidetic variation”. However, closer analysis of everyday life interactions also shows that instances of “phenomenological modifications are quite common in child-adult verbal interactions” (p. 206). In these cases at least, the natural attitude is transformed into a theoretical or reflective attitude.

If certainties and the related process of naturalization and typification are the building blocks of the process through which we become cultural beings, uncertainty and relativization are the cognitive tools through which we become and behave as rational and moral beings.

This special issue represents a collective effort to explore the territories of certainty and uncertainty and the relevance the management of epistemics has in social interaction. As recent studies suggest (see Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011) and this issue shows, communicating certainty and uncertainty is part of the process through which people construct and maintain shared knowledge, position themselves along the “knowledge and power” dimension and take or decline their responsibility in the representation of events.

Analyzing William James’ investigation on subjectivity in the construction of knowledge, Stara explores the nature of belief and its being “a sort of feeling” accompanying the advent of a stable idea and indexing the ending of our theoretical attitude. Belief is, then, an attitude toward an epistemic object, an intentional state of mind through which the knowing subject admits/accepts something as existing. In the stream of phenomenology, James stresses the active involvement of human subjectivity in determining the reality of an object and the unavoidable process by which we add a mode of existence to intentional objects by deploying our epistemic stances when referring to them. Far from being uniquely cognitive, this process is also profoundly emotional as certainty always and unavoidably has an energetic or emotional charge. Yet doubt is also part of the game as only objects that remain un-contradicted are believed and taken as absolute reality.

Boncompagni’s article also stresses the role of certainty as a condition of possibility for our everyday life. Analyzing Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* and his metaphor of everyday certainties as hinges, she argues in favor of the “taken-for-granted” nature of these certainties. By illustrating what happens when these certainties are not taken for granted (i.e. the loss of natural self-evidence taking place

in some mental disturbances), Boncompagni demonstrates that when these certainties are referred to or simply evoked they are *eo ipso* reversed into uncertainties and cannot work as hinges any longer.

Analyzing instances of interactions between physicians and patients with frontotemporal dementia (FTD), Muntigl, Hoedl and Ransmayr show the crucial impact the communication of certainty has on the person's ability to act and be perceived as a competent social actor. Although patients have - by definition - primary access to their condition (type 1 knowledge, see Pomerantz, 1980) and therefore have the epistemic right over their own experience, the ways patients affected by FTD account for their condition reveal (or are considered to reveal) their incapability of being the better witnesses of their lived experience: most patients display certainty of not being ill even when the doctor constructs her questions in ways that - presupposing their "being ill" - seek confirmation; patients don't support their claims of "not being ill" with valid arguments, nor are they able to demonstrate that they are not ill. Two competing territories of knowledge are at stake here: the patient's first hand experience vs. the doctors' expert knowledge (epistemic of experience vs. epistemic of expertise, see Heritage, 2012; Bolden, in press). Yet the latter has primacy over the former that, in these cases at least, is marginalized and even emptied by the diagnosis itself: being affected by FTD means not being able to understand - among other things - that one is affected by FTD and how the illness is compromising one's own life. Within the frame of the diagnosis, patients' certainty of "not being ill" is nothing more than pure denial or the ultimate resistance of those that cannot resist. It does not change the physician's epistemic status with respect to the patients' condition. When the doctor closes the sequence by saying "everything is fine actually", this barely sounds like a factual statement.

The crucial role of epistemic competence is also underscored by Scopesi, Rosso, Viterbori and Panchieri. Adopting a developmental perspective, they show how children gradually gain access to the idea that understanding is or may be relative, partial and even subjective. As they mature, they move from a world and a vocabulary of certainty to a world depicted also through a vocabulary of uncertainty. The mastery of words referring to inner states increases with age and reflects children's ability to understand that people may have different psychological states. Analyzing the production of two cognitive verbs (think and know) and markers of uncertainty in autobiographical narratives, the authors show an increase of these linguistic means in preadolescents and infer that the appreciation of subjectivity increases with age.

In a similar developmental perspective, Barbieri describes the expression of certainty and uncertainty in children aged three to ten. Her results are consistent

with Scopesi, Rosso, Viterbori and Panchieri: children show a progressive sensitivity to uncertainty as they grow up, a richer linguistic repertoire for expressing different degrees of certainty and a growing ability in recognizing and expressing the epistemic continuum ranging from certainty to uncertainty. Although some instances of modality can be found in children aged three, the pivot age seems to be five. As Barbieri points out in her conclusion, the process by which children become theoretical beings, able to recognize and cope with modalities in knowledge does not end at age ten. Rather it goes on till adolescence and adulthood. In some sense, we all learn that knowledge may be relative and this appears to be a complex and crucial, developmental task.

Lexical and morfo-syntactic markers are the most common and easily recognizable means for communicating the speaker's epistemic status, yet they are not the only ones. As Wollermann, Schröder and Schade illustrate in their paper, prosody (i.e. the vocal yet non verbal component of speech) is routinely exploited for signaling and detecting certainty and uncertainty in conversation. Fillers, pauses, latency of response, rising intonation are relevant cues used for both communicating and inferring uncertainty. Some syntagmatic combinations (e.g. rising intonation, pause and hesitation) appear to lead to stronger degree of perceived uncertainty than others (e.g. rising intonation plus pause). Interestingly enough, also visual cues (smiles, funny faces, raising of eyebrows or head) are used to detect uncertainty in talk. And this result leads to the fundamental multimodality of everyday communication.

Although verbal language is the primary means for communicating, and in some circumstances (e.g. telephone calls) the only one, in most daily interactions communication is multimodal (see Streeck, Goodwin, & LeBaron, 2011): facial expressions, body movements and gestures strongly participate in communicating our epistemic status. How then are epistemic stances deployed by non-vocal means?

In their article, Ricci Bitti, Bonfiglioli, Melani, Caterina and Garotti illustrate how and to what extent the face plays an important role in communicating epistemic stances. Their study demonstrates that people consistently communicate doubt and uncertainty through facial expressions that are recognizable, reproducible and have specific patterns. In particular, they demonstrate that the expression conveying certainty of not knowing (i.e. the facial expression corresponding to the verbal statement "I don't know") and the expression conveying a doubt as to whether the speaker knows or doesn't know (i.e. the facial expression corresponding to verbal statements like "I'm not sure") share some traits while differing with respect to others. In any case, the communication of epistemic modality activates

facial expressions involved in cognitive processes. This result is crucial, as a long tradition of studies has limited the analysis of facial expressions to emotions.

As the article by Vincze, Poggi and D’Errico shows, epistemic modalities are also communicated through gestures. The authors focus predominantly on non verbal means for communicating “precision” (vs. vagueness), i.e. gestures that add a specific semantic trait to what is verbally conveyed or reinforce non verbally the idea of precision when it is also verbally marked. By empirically analyzing a corpus of recorded verbal interactions, they show how participants deploy “precision” through a particular gesture: the hand in beak shape. The effectiveness of non verbal means in regards to conveying epistemic stances is even more evident when analyzing the use of Sign Language by deaf people. Gianfreda, Volterra and Zuczkowski illustrate how highly conventionalized signs and facial expressions are routinely used by Italian Sign Language users to index necessity, certainty, commitment or their counterparts: possibility, uncertainty and disengagement. As the articles presented so far illustrate, (dis)stance-taking devices are crucial components of both verbal and sign languages as they express and - at the same time - perform humans’ “epistemic vigilance” (Sperber, Clément, Heintz & et al., 2010).

Clearly enough, the communication of uncertain and certain information is essential for individual behavior and decision-making. But people may have difficulty in understanding uncertainty-related problems. As the study of Agus, Penna, Peró-Cebollero, Guàrdia-Olmos, and Pessa suggests, this difficulty can depend on the way in which materials are presented and communicated. Ways of representing events (through verbal-numerical means or via graphical means) are consequential in supporting probabilistic reasoning in recipients: while some representations seem to facilitate the understanding of uncertainty-related problems, others seem to be less efficient. The finding of this study outlines a zone of responsibility for those in charge of representing the degree of probability of events that have to be assessed by recipients (i.e. a weather forecast as well as side effects of medicine): their understanding also depends on how they are designed.

To summarize, the articles collected in this issue explore the need for certainty and the value of uncertainty from different theoretical perspectives and through different methodological approaches. They show that people routinely display certainty as well as uncertainty in ordinary and institutional circumstances though verbal and non verbal means, how both modalities are crucial components for mutual comprehension, and how becoming competent in epistemics is a demanding yet fundamental developmental task: even interpreting weather forecasts or a patient information leaflet requires knowing how to cope with uncertainty-related everyday issues.

Notes

¹ In the terminology of phenomenology “natural” or “naturalistic” do not refer to any biological, neuronal, genetic or otherwise innate disposition. They refer to the ordinary, routinary, un-reflective quality of the activity under scrutiny.

² The excerpt has also been analysed in Caronia, 2012a where it is compared with naturally occurring interactions concerning screen-mediated activities collected within the same ethnographic study.

³ Contemporary ethnography avoids, as much as possible, invoking participants’ intentions, goals or states of mind in interpreting what actually occurs unless participants overtly refer to these motives to make sense of their own discourses and practices. From this perspective, the issue is not whether the mother intended to legitimize her daughter’s ignoring the question and continuing to read. The mother’s intervention may also be interpreted as an indirect repair addressed to the researcher who repaired the girl’s absence of reply. This interpretation is more than plausible: as the researcher was not a family member, she was not entitled to sanction the girl’s behaviour nor to act as the mother routinely acted in similar circumstances (i.e. when children watch television or play videogames). Whichever the mother’s intention is (signalling the inappropriateness of the outsider’s light reproach or sustaining the value of immersive and compulsive reading) what she actually does with words is a hyper appreciation of the novelist and, by consequence, a legitimization of “doing nothing but reading”. Even if unplanned and unconscious or instrumentally used for oblique repairing, this stance toward book reading is publicly available for the children (and for the analyst as well) as an interpretive resource. In so far as moral stances and ideologies are in the participants’ words and actions, they need not be necessarily in the mind.

⁴ The non accountable character of reading strongly contrasts with screen mediated activities in this family that are routinely detected, labelled and analysed, see Caronia, 2012a.

⁵ This reported life story has been previously analyzed in Caronia, 2012b.

⁶ The heading clearly quotes the title of the recent work by Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld (see Berger & Zijderveld, 2009).

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