

On trying to say what “goes without saying”. Wittgenstein on certainty and ineffability¹

Anna Boncompagni

University of Roma Tre

Abstract

This paper offers a philosophical outlook on the subject of the communication of certainty and uncertainty, by focusing on the later Ludwig Wittgenstein’s image of “hinges”. Hinges are basic common sense certainties which ordinarily “go without saying”. In a sense, they even require not to be said. Lingering over the debate on the ineffability of hinges which is at the core of the Wittgensteinian secondary literature, but also hinting at some studies in psychopathology, the paper argues that in extraordinary contexts to assert explicitly a hinge-certainty is possible and may be important, while in ordinary contexts certainty can only be communicated through silence: when a certainty which “goes without saying” is explicitly said, the situation paradoxically results in uncertainty.

Keywords: certainty, Wittgenstein, hinges, ineffability, common sense

Introduction

English and French (and possibly other languages) possess an interesting expression that conveys the characteristics of the phenomenon on which I would like to focus. The expression is “to go without saying”, or “aller sans dire” and the phenomenon is that of obvious aspects of life or of discourse which *do not require to be said*. In certain cases, these aspects even seem to *require not to be said*. The framework for my remarks is provided by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969/1975; hereafter *OC*). In these unfinished and almost entirely unpolished and unrevised notes, written during the last year and a half of his life, Wittgenstein, in discussing George E. Moore’s common sense propositions (Moore, 1959), deals with the fundamental certainties of our *Weltbild*, our world-picture:

Anna Boncompagni – *On trying to say what “goes without saying”. Wittgenstein on certainty and ineffability*

platitudes such as “the earth has existed for a great many years”, “objects do not disappear when you put them in a drawer”, “every human being has a brain” and the like, which constitute the background of all our judgments. These certainties play a very peculiar role in our life. As famously stated by Wittgenstein, like the hinges of a door, they must stay put, in order for the door to turn. Their staying put is ordinarily connected with silence: to say explicitly a hinge-certainty amounts to casting doubt on it.

By working on Wittgenstein’s remarks, my aim is to offer a philosophical answer to the questions: Is it always possible to say meaningfully what ordinarily “goes without saying”? What happens in a conversation when a person utters such a platitude? It is my conviction that what Wittgenstein had to say about this topic is of relevance for studying how “the communication of certainty and uncertainty” effectively works. Namely, it will be argued that when a certainty which “goes without saying” is explicitly said, the situation paradoxically results in uncertainty.

In the second section I will describe Wittgenstein’s attitude towards knowledge and certainties, and present a brief survey of the secondary literature, dealing particularly with the problem of sayability. This part of the paper is exegetical and strictly philosophical: it is concerned with Wittgenstein’s remarks and with their most relevant interpretations. This will lead to acknowledging the centrality of contexts in the discussion. In the third section, developing more freely some suggestions from Wittgenstein’s writings, I will touch on some *extraordinary* contexts in which to communicate a truism explicitly is possible and even important: heuristic contexts, cultural changes, encounters between different cultures. In the fourth section I will show that in *ordinary* contexts the uttering of a hinge-certainty is generally meaningless and may even be a sign of mental disturbance. We shall see that some studies in psychopathology confirm the relevance of Wittgenstein’s remarks. In the Concluding Remarks, it will be argued that except for limited, though relevant, situations, hinge-certainty is not *said*, and only by not being said, can it be *shown*. In other words, certainty is communicated through silence. Finally, in the Discussion I will hint at how these remarks can shed light on the general topic of doubt and of its uses and misuses in philosophy.

***On Certainty* and its interpreters**

Wittgenstein’s starting point in *OC* are George E. Moore’s common sense propositions, with which Moore dealt in his papers “A Defense of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World”². There are certain propositions – affirmed Moore – that we know for sure to be absolutely certain, although we are

not able to prove them. Examples are: there exists at present a living human body, which is my body; ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of earth; the earth has existed for a very long time; here is a hand (uttered while raising a hand in good conditions of visibility). Wittgenstein acknowledges that Moore discovered a special kind of proposition; but he also highlights that there is something wrong in saying that we “know” the content of these propositions:

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

One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. (...)

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. (OC, §243)³

Starting from Moore’s examples, Wittgenstein enlarges the set of platitudes to be considered, including, for instance, that books do not disappear when we put them in a drawer, that my name is (in his case) Ludwig Wittgenstein, that everyone has parents, that 12×12 is 144, that I am now writing in English, that there are physical objects, that water boils at 100°C . Some of these examples belong to personal experience, some to sensory awareness, some to a cultural or scientific background, some to mathematics or logic. We can try to classify them (Moyal-Sharrock, 2005b, p. 100), but much more than any classification, what matters is to understand that they play a very peculiar role in our linguistic games and in our life (Rhees, 2003, pp. 78, 105).

Wittgenstein does not define certainties but makes use of some metaphors to describe them: he speaks of hardened propositions which function as a “channel” (*Leitung*) for the fluid ones (OC, §96); of the “river-bed of thoughts” (OC, §97) and the “bank of the river” consisting partly of hard rock partly of sand (OC, §99); of the “axis around which a body rotates” (OC, §152); of things which are fixed, removed from the traffic or “shunted onto an unused siding” (OC, §210); of “the scaffolding of our thoughts” (OC, §211); of “foundation-walls” which “are carried by the whole house” (OC, §248); of “hinges” that must stay put in order for the door to turn (OC, §§341-343). Although I retain that the axis metaphor is the most interesting and the most apt for transmitting the peculiar features of *Weltbild* certainties (cf. Winch, 1998, p. 198; Schulte, 2005, p. 71), I will adopt what has be-

come the usual way of talking about them, i. e. as the “hinge propositions” or “hinge certainties” or simply “hinges”. Hinges are all those obvious facts and beliefs that lie at the bottom of our judging, acting and living. We normally take them for granted, and to raise doubts about them would mean to put everything in doubt, including our capacity to think and judge (*OC*, §§103, 115, 162).

The reason why Moore’s attitude towards certainties is misleading, then, is that by claiming to know them, he admits that they can be put in doubt. The point that Wittgenstein is making is that we do not have an *epistemic* relation – in the strict sense of the term – to certainty: “‘Knowledge’ and ‘certainty’ belong to different categories” (*OC*, §308). This remark is at the core of the debate about *OC*.

A representative survey of the literature would certainly include, among others, Marie McGinn’s seminal non-epistemic interpretation (McGinn, 1989), Avrum Stroll’s foundational account (Stroll, 1994; 2004), Michael Williams’ contextualist reply to foundationalism (Williams, 2005), Crispin Wright’s conception of hinge certainty as rational entitlement or non evidential warrant (Wright, 2004a; 2004b). But what I am interested in describing is, chiefly, the debate around the propositional or non propositional nature of hinges, which is strictly connected to the subject of ineffability. This theme, which is now one of the main topics of discussion in literature, was anticipated by G. H. von Wright (1972), according to whom hinges are not propositions. The topic is very controversial. Generally, those who hold an epistemic view of hinges affirm that they are propositions, those who hold a practical view affirm that they are not (this is not the case for Annalisa Coliva, as we shall see). Stroll (1994) retains that Wittgenstein, at the beginning of *OC*, thinks of hinges as propositional, while as time passes he starts to think of them in non-propositional terms. Similarly in this respect, Peter Winch (1998) affirms that in *OC* there are traces or “egg-shells” of Wittgenstein’s earlier way of thinking about propositions, but what is clearly new in it is the emphasis on action and on judging as an activity itself. Moyal-Sharrock (2005b, p. 72) characterizes hinges as certainties which are “indubitable, foundational, nonempirical, grammatical, ineffable, in action”, and strongly takes sides for the non epistemic and non propositional account. In order to avoid the risk of confusion between hinges and empirical propositions, she introduces the notion of *Dopplegänger*: identical sentences can have different uses and therefore different statuses (*Ivi*, pp. 140-141; see also Moyal-Sharrock, 2005a, p. 90). “This is my hand”, which is normally a hinge, can be a meaningful empirical proposition if said, for instance, after a surgical operation. In her own words:

(...) [I]t is simply that we *use* the sentence as a norm at one time (and therefore the sentence is not *said* or mentioned in our language game), and we use an identi-

cal sentence as an hypothesis at another time (and in this capacity, the sentence is mentioned, and indeed questioned). (Moyal-Sharrock, 2005b, p. 141)

I will now focus on what is stated within the parentheses of Moyal-Sharrock's explanation. When we use the sentence as a non propositional hinge, the sentence is not *said*. When it is used as a proper empirical proposition, it is *said* and, if need be, questioned.

Silences, voices and their contexts

Ineffability is, indeed, in Moyal-Sharrock's account, one of the characteristics of hinges. In what sense, then, are hinges unsayable? The possibility of saying something is, in Wittgenstein, always linked to the meaningfulness of what is said, so that, roughly, when a person utters a nonsense, it is correct to say that she has spoken, but it is not correct to say that she has said anything (Moyal-Sharrock, 2005a, p. 90; 2005b, p. 43). According to Moyal-Sharrock, when hinges are said – *except for heuristic circumstances* (more on this shortly) – they lose sense and meaning. It is only when it is not said, that a hinge works as a hinge, because to say it “is to suggest that it does not *go without saying*, that it needs support, grounding, context” (*Ivi*, p. 95). To use another image, we could say that what works in the background cannot be put into the foreground without losing its nature (*OC*, §94; Wittgenstein, 1977/1980, p. 16; Boncompagni, 2011). To put the background in the spotlight, means not having a background anymore (not *that* background). To say a hinge, which is what exhibits the background, the horizon, the limits, the contours of the linguistic game (Perissinotto, 1991, p. 148), means to lose it as a hinge, as it is what is ruled out of the game, our never calling into question certain facts, that makes the game possible (Rhees, 2003, p. 91). According to Wolganst (1987), moreover, what is precluded is not only the possibility of uttering such a certainty, but even the possibility of speaking *about* it – as shown in Wittgenstein's own dissatisfaction with his way of dealing with the matter (*OC*, §358; Rhees, 2003, p. 58). The linguistic terrain in which our experience of the world has its roots, then, can be the basis of experience only insofar as it remains forgotten, silent, hidden behind our backs (Perissinotto, 1991, p. 203).

An alternative interpretation, which in part differs from the “ineffabilist reading”, is offered by Coliva (2010), whose starting point is that hinge propositions *are* propositions, though in a “fairly relaxed” notion of proposition, and that they are different from empirical propositions because their nature is normative and not merely descriptive (cf. also Kober, 1996). For this reason, our relation to them

is not epistemic. This does not prevent us from saying them, meaningfully and precisely *qua* hinges, without changing their nature (Coliva, 2010, p. 174) – which is what we ordinarily do for example when we teach them or remind someone of them. As mentioned, Moyal-Sharrock (2005b, p. 67) actually does admit that hinges can be said in heuristic circumstances. What Coliva (2010, p. 177) adds is that it is only by stating their full propositionality that we can understand how they – once said – can serve a recognized communicative purpose.

In my opinion, Moyal-Sharrock and Coliva's positions are not so distant from one another, if we consider (as Coliva, 2013 also underlines) that the notion of propositionality is something that Wittgenstein intentionally does not define in clear-cut terms in *OC*:

But wouldn't one have to say then, that there is no sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions? The lack of sharpness *is* that of the boundary between *rule* and empirical proposition.

Here one must, I believe, remember that the concept 'proposition' itself is not a sharp one. (*OC*, §§319-320)

The intertwinement of empirical and logical, propositional and normative aspects of hinges is what Wittgenstein himself, in my view, is trying to convey. This, of course, is not tantamount to asserting that the distinction cannot be made (cf. *OC* §§97-98). His aim is twofold: he is working on the one hand against a too intellectualistic notion of certainty, and on the other hand against a too naturalistic notion of action. His insistence on learning and habit is part of this strategy.

This intertwinement of nature and culture, action and language, habit and belief which this position entails, is at the core of the philosophical tradition towards which Wittgenstein felt – with annoyance – he was being led by his reflections (*OC*, §422), that is, pragmatism. No wonder that, according to a “pragmatist reinterpretation” (Pihlström, 2012, p. 13) of his later philosophy, the denial of the dichotomy between the propositional and non-propositional captures the “spirit” of *OC* better than a dichotomous interpretation. The anti-dichotomist stance which characterizes pragmatism is indeed in tune with Wittgenstein's invitation to free ourselves from “the tyranny of concepts”, that is, from the conviction that our philosophical categories possess sharp boundaries (Calcaterra, 2003, p. 135). In my view, the debate about the pragmatic traits of *OC* could gain, in terms of depth and accuracy, by referring more directly to pragmatism⁴. Moyal-Sharrock's reading strongly emphasizes the non-propositional nature of hinges, in the name of a pragmatic account of the way we act and judge (see also Moyal-Sharrock, 2003;

2013). Although I retain that this highlights a crucial aspect of Wittgenstein's later reflections, I also think that it risks oversimplifying his way of considering action itself and overlooking the persistence of his interest in the linguistic and cultural nature of human beings and communities. Conversely, Coliva's insistence on the propositionality of hinges risks failing to acknowledge that the normative and even strictly propositional understanding is from the very beginning a practice guided by habits and grounded in knowing-how. Our pragmatic acceptance of norms, according to Coliva, is not something animal, like Moyal-Sharrock underlines (cf. also Moyal-Sharrock, 2013); rather, it relies on our grasping the *content* of normative propositions (Coliva 2013). It is not necessary, nor completely satisfactory, in my opinion, to explain the grasping of norms exclusively in terms of our animal and instinctive way of acting and reacting. After all, our form of life is a human, and hence linguistic, form of life. Nevertheless, our human and linguistic form of life itself is characterized, in its basic (that is, confident, sure, certain) behaviour by a kind of knowing-how which – to use Gilbert Ryle's words – "is not reducible to any sandwich of knowings-that"; rather, what should be accepted is the opposite move – that is, the reducibility of knowing-that to knowing-how (Ryle, 1945, p. 15)⁵.

Given the primary connection between action and language, the propositional and non propositional readings appear not so disparate. This is particularly clear if we consider another point that the two readings have in common, in relation to the issue of ineffability: their insistence on the relevance of contexts.

The first point to make, in this respect, is that the meaning of an expression is determined by the *particular circumstances* of the utterance, and we need these circumstances to understand the meaning:

(...) [T]he words "I am here" have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, - and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination. (OC, §348; see also §§347, 350, 622).

But in addition to this general remark we can notice that there are some *typical contexts* in which hinge propositions can be said. Wittgenstein gives us some suggestions, related to teaching/learning and elucidating the meaning of a word:

"A is a physical object" is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what "A" means, or what "physical object" means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and "physical object" is a log-

ical concept. (Like colour, quantity,...) And that is why no such proposition as "There are physical objects" can be formulated.

Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn. (OC, §36)

If someone were to look at an English pillar-box and say "I am sure that it's red", we should have to suppose that he was colour-blind, or believe he had no mastery of English and knew the correct name for the colour in some other language.

If neither was the case we should not quite understand him. (OC, §526)

Other cases may be related to jokes (OC, §436) and to medical treatment (OC, §533). But the most interesting contexts in which hinges can be said and put in question are those of cultural or scientific changes and – which is often connected – encounters with other cultures. In these circumstances, what emerges in full light is the link between hinges and what Wittgenstein calls a *Weltbild*, a picture of the world, and, more generally, the existence of *Weltbilder* themselves, which in ordinary circumstances remain hidden.

The most striking example of a change of *Weltbild* is one that Wittgenstein gives without intention. The impossibility of going to the moon was part of common sense in the middle of the XX Century, so much so that he could affirm with complete certainty and confidence:

What we believe depends on what we learn. We all believe that it isn't possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief - they are wrong and we know it.

If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far. (OC, §286)

The fact that time proved him wrong (about the moon), evidently, proved him right (about the *Weltbild*). When a *Weltbild* changes, what happens is that previous platitudes are thought as subject to being true or false and are put in question. According to Moyal-Sharrock, what is at stake is not properly a hinge but an empirical *Doppelgänger*, while the hinge has been given up. According to Coliva, the hinge, a proposition which has a normative role, is itself changing. Be it as it may, the point is that in this moment certainty can be said and can be spoken about – indeed, this is exactly what happens, there is a sort of public conversation about that matter.

One of the major factors which contribute to the changing of a *Weltbild* is the contact with another *Weltbild*. Far from leading to an “inviolabilist” approach to certainties and to relativism, Wittgenstein’s remarks on this topic can be read as highlighting that sometimes hinges have to come to the surface (Crary, 2005, pp. 284, 289):

I meet someone from Mars and he asks me "How many toes have human beings got?" - I say "Ten. I'll show you", and take my shoes off. Suppose he was surprised that I knew with such certainty, although I hadn't looked at my toes - ought I to say: "We humans know how many toes we have whether we can see them or not"? (OC, §430)

The encounter with an alien (here a Martian!) society or culture may require to say hinges, because we suddenly realize that something which was considered obvious is not obvious for everyone at every time and in every place. In a sense, it is only thanks to such an encounter that we *discover* that we have this certainty – we discover, that is, one of the axes around which our life rotates.

This may also lead to an exploration of our own world-picture (cf. Bax, 2011, ch. 5), which, at a closer examination, turns out to be constituted by inhomogeneous groups and multiple social identities, some predominant above others. Here a negative aspect of silence about hinges emerges. In fact, hinges can be the vehicle of prejudices, stereotypes, oppression. For example, it was for a tacit taken-for-granted normative background that in the past only men had the right to vote. Other hinges with a similar social relevance are connected to race, gender identities, the idea of family. The connection between silence and prejudice takes here two forms. On the one hand, prejudices themselves go without saying and are shown in ordinary actions, practices, habits which are considered obvious and not in need of any explanation or justification. This kind of silence ought to be removed by making the “hinge-prejudices” explicit which sustain the oppressive practices. Saying them is the first step towards seeing them and, eventually, fighting them (Medina, 2006, p. 154). On the other hand, the by-product of this primary silence is the *silencing* of marginal groups and identities: the voices of the marginalized are considered nonsense, suppressed or simply not heard. This second kind of silence should be removed by educating the capacity to hear and listen to marginalized voices and their sometimes embryonic attempt to express their identities and experiences (Medina, 2004; 2006).

This line of thought, connecting silence not only to *Weltbild* but to prejudice and stereotype, is not explicitly present in Wittgenstein’s writings, but it can be

identified as a possible implicit (and ethically significant) new direction that his remarks suggest⁷.

Mental disturbance

Another direction that the reflection can take is more explicitly suggested by Wittgenstein in his many remarks connecting the utterance of hinges to mental disturbance. If saying a hinge amounts to doubting what is not reasonable to doubt, then – apart from the social and political considerations of the previous paragraph – it may be a sign of insanity. In this sense, *asserting* to know and *denying* hinges are on a par.

If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc.etc. [a place which is evidently not his home or country], I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one. (OC, §71)

Can I believe for one moment that I have ever been in the stratosphere? No. So do I *know* the contrary, like Moore?

There cannot be any doubt about it for me as a reasonable person. - That's it. – (OC, §§218-219)

The reasonableness of a person might be put in question, on the same grounds, if she uttered a platitude – say, “I am here” – without any understandable motive (cf. OC, §348).

Wittgenstein’s remarks about mental disturbance⁸ sound surprisingly similar to the description of what some psychiatrists have identified as a specific disease and called “psychopathology of common sense”, or, using one patient’s expression, “*der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit*”, the loss of natural self-evidence (Blankenburg, 1971/1998; Blankenburg, 2001; Stanghellini, 2006/2008)⁹. Not being a psychologist and not having enough time here to discuss these studies in more detail, I would like to simply report some of the words that patients themselves use to describe their situation.

The picture that I have of the world, the way in which life goes, do not suffice for me.

The others limit themselves to the right questions, the natural problems.

What I lack is prior to what they lack. The others simply possess it. Only in this way it is possible to understand things. Then, problems do not exist. It is possible to build relations with others and with a dimension in which everything goes without saying. Only then is everything natural and self-evident.

Sureness cannot go without saying anymore.

It is necessary to reflect about the situation in advance. You do it as well. Only, you do not realize it, because it is too obvious. (Blankenburg, 1971/1998 pp., 59, 60, 104, 117, 137; auth. trans.).

It seems that I lack a natural understanding for what is matter of course and obvious to others.

I don't know what to call this... It is not knowledge... Every child knows these things! It is the kind of thing you just get naturally. (Blankenburg, 2001, pp. 307, 308)

I lack the backbone of the rules for living with the others. Reality is too complex and I cannot find key-rules.

I am an anthropologist in a foreign land.

My aversion against common sense is stronger than my survival instinct.

Maybe, in order to be in good health, some questions must be removed. (Stanghellini, 2006/2008, pp. 123, 125; auth.transl.).

Not much needs to be added to these notes. These patients talk about naturalness, grounds, rules, pictures of the world, natural and unnatural questions, things that go without saying, sureness. Why do these examples matter for our discussion on the ineffability of hinges? Because the ineffability of hinges, their going without saying, is precisely what is precluded from these patients. Their need to ask questions, think in advance, their uncertainties in the everyday activities, their craving for rules are the sign that there is something wrong.

One further remark can be added to cover the relation between the last two aspects which we have considered, namely social change and mental disturbance. It must not be forgotten that *disturbing* voices, that is, different, challenging, revolutionary possibilities, can and often are declared (mentally) *disturbed*, that is, insane, and therefore put at the margins of society and silenced. The concept of margin is (paradoxically) central in this discussion. What is at stake is not only the acknowledgment of the social and historical nature of any definition of normality and insanity. The point is that margins are intrinsically bound to silence, and it is the unspeakable nature of the limits of our form of life that Wittgenstein invites us to explore.

What is interesting, finally, is that the symptoms of the psychopathology of common sense, in a slighter form, also occur in the way some philosophers use to doubt *and* to assert things with certainty. It is not only the skeptic with his unnatural doubts that resembles the schizophrenic. Both Blankenburg (1971/1998, p. 87) and Stanghellini (2006/2008, pp. 14, 139) acknowledge the closeness between the phenomenological *epoché* and the schizophrenic experience of alienation. But even a common sense philosopher like G. E. Moore, with his claiming to know and saying that he knows things, resembles the behavior of a schizophrenic.

I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy." (*OC*, §467)

There is, evidently, a difference of degree between madness and philosophy, measured by the uneasiness and suffering of the person, and a difference of context. But the distinction is not clear-cut at all. And one of the aims of Wittgenstein's remarks in *OC* may be identified just in this drawing the attention to the vagueness of the boundary between philosophy and illness. The relation between philosophy and illness is actually a constant theme in Wittgenstein's work, and the notes of *OC* provide an interesting way of connecting it to a reflection about the healthy (*gesund*) nature of common sense (*gesunder Menschenverstand*)¹⁰.

Concluding remarks

In trying to answer the question "Is it always possible to say meaningfully what 'goes without saying?'" from a Wittgensteinian perspective, we examined Wittgenstein's account of hinges in *OC*. We saw the most discussed controversies in literature and particularly focused on the propositional/non propositional and effable/ineffable perspectives. We therefore explored the relevance of contexts, lingering over social and cultural encounters and change, also underlying the negative aspect of silence on hinges: its hiding prejudice. Finally, we examined the theme of mental disturbance, and connected it on the one hand with marginality, on the other hand with philosophy itself. In concluding this detour, I would like to get back to the theme which occasioned it: how does the communication of certainty (and uncertainty) work? What Wittgenstein helps us to acknowledge, I submit, is that in our ordinary life certainty (the "hinge certainty" with which he dealt) is primarily communicated through *silence*. The confidence we have with the world

and with the way in which everyday life goes, requires to remain in the background, because it is precisely the persistence of this background *qua* background, its ineffability, that allows it to work. It is the unspoken character of the limits our form of life, which makes it natural, for us, to live in the way we live. Conversely, when these certainties which usually “go without saying” are explicitly asserted (or denied), their existence comes to the fore, and the result is *uncertainty*. For instance, it is uncertainty which characterizes the situation of a child to whom it is still unclear how to follow a rule, and who asks her parents the meaning of something which is perfectly obvious to them. It is uncertainty which characterizes deep cultural changes, since during them what previously had always been unshaken is suddenly questioned, and it may be not easy to foresee the consequences of this change (think for example about genetic engineering). It is uncertainty, of course, if not desperation, which characterize life itself for someone suffering from a mental disturbance, as we saw in the case of the psychopathology of common sense. Eventually, it is uncertainty about the very foundations of human knowledge which characterizes the rise of philosophical doubts.

The ineffability of certainty and of its limits is a unifying topic in the whole of Wittgenstein’s work (Perissinotto, 1991; McGinn, 2001; Boncompagni, 2012a), clearly linking his early reflections on logic with the late remarks of *OC*. As in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*¹¹ logic had to “take care of itself” (§5.473), in *OC* practice “has to speak for itself” (*OC*, §139). The *Tractatus* stated that the logical form cannot be represented in propositions (§4.12); echoing that perspective, in *OC* Wittgenstein writes: “Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it” (*OC*, §501).

Using his early distinction between saying and showing, but applying it to the more pragmatic perspective of his later work, we can conclude that except for limited, though relevant, contexts, hinge certainty is not said but shown; and only by not being said can it be shown.

Discussion

It could be asked what is it that differentiates the philosophical doubt from the everyday doubt (and concomitantly the philosophical “I know” from the everyday “I know”). My answer is that the philosophical doubt, in its different historical variants (roughly, skeptic doubt, Cartesian methodological doubt, phenomenological *epoché*), risks being an unhealthy doubt, resembling schizophrenia, while the healthy doubt that characterizes everyday life and authentic inquiry is what Charles

S. Peirce once called the “real and living doubt” (Peirce, 1931-1935, § 5.376). The attitude toward doubt is another interesting convergence between Wittgenstein and the pragmatist tradition, Peirce in particular (cf. Menary, 2003; Tiercelin, 2010). The similarity between Peirce’s conception, as expressed for instance in “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” and in “The Fixation of Belief” (Peirce, 1931-1935, §§ 5.264-317, §§ 5.358-387), and Wittgenstein’s remarks in OC is striking. Both contrast the Cartesian strategy – that is, the idea that doubt constitutes the starting point of philosophy itself – by underlining that doubt is meaningful only against the background of certainties which are not doubted, and both point out that it is not possible to doubt at will: doubt has to be experienced as concrete, while a “paper-doubt” has no consequences in life. This is, of course, a topic for a wider analysis, for which this paper can constitute only a hint. What is interesting anyway for our purposes here, to conclude, is that Wittgenstein (and the pragmatists) show that doubt regarding hinges (and the philosophical doubt is a doubt regarding hinges *par excellence*) is, in ordinary and healthy circumstances, not raised: certainty is communicated by means of silence.

Notes

¹ A former version of this paper was presented at the International Conference “The Communication of Certainty and Uncertainty”, which was held at the University of Macerata, Italy, from October 3rd to October 5th, 2012. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for their work, and to those who attended my talk for their insightful comments. I also warmly thank Rosa M. Calcaterra and Annalisa Coliva for their precious remarks on the draft of the paper, and two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

² The former was published in 1925, the latter in 1939, and both were re-published in Moore (1959).

³ Cf. also Wittgenstein (1953/2001, part II, p. 188).

⁴ There is no space here to discuss this theme in more details. For a comparison with the Jamesian side of pragmatism, see Boncompagni (2012b) and (2012c). For a comparison with the Peircean side, see Johanson (1994), Howat (2013), Boncompagni (2013).

⁵ Working on the Wittgensteinian remarks about know-how, Harrison (2012, Ch. 5) interestingly proposes an interpretation of hinges which is diametrically opposed to Coliva’s. Whereas the latter holds a non epistemic but propositional view, Harrison, considering know-how as a form of knowledge, puts forth an epistemic (in a wide sense) but non propositional view.

⁶ The *Weltbild*, picture of the world, is described as “the inherited background” against which we distinguish between true and false (OC, §94), as a mythology (OC, §95), the “substratum” of our enquiring and asserting (OC, §162), the “matter-of-course foundation” for any scientific

research (OC, §167). On the notion of *Weltbild* and its relevance in ethics, cf. Christensen (2011).

⁷ Not being possible to discuss this in more details here, I refer to José Medina's work, cf. Medina (2004) and (2006). For a broader discussion on contexts, prejudices and vocabularies see Richard Rorty's work, for example Rorty (1989). Medina (2006, p. xi) interestingly labels Rorty's position as a "view from here" while his own proposal is described as a "view from elsewhere".

⁸ See also OC, §§72-75, 155, 217, 220, 314-315, 420.

⁹ The philosophical background of these studies is the phenomenological tradition, though in Stanghellini's case Wittgenstein is mentioned as well, particularly on common sense and certainties (2006/2008: pp. 101-103, 150; see also Campbell (2001) and Rhodes and Gipps (2008), both on delusion).

¹⁰ Cf. Boncompagni (2012b, p. 45).

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1922).

References

- Bax, C. (2011). *Subjectivity after Wittgenstein*. London: Continuum.
- Blankenburg, W. (1998). *La perdita dell'evidenza naturale* (F. M. Ferro, R. M. Salerno, Trans.). Milano: Raffaello Cortina. (Original work, *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1971).
- (2001) "First Steps Toward a Psychopathology of 'Common Sense'". *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 8 (4), 303-315 (originally appeared in 1969).
- Boncompagni, A. (2011). "From the Ground to the Background. Forms of Life as 'the Given' in Wittgenstein". *Le&PS – Logic and Philosophy of Science*, 9 (1), 451-460.
- (2012a). *Wittgenstein. Lo sguardo e il limite*. Milano: Mimesis.
- (2012b). "The Mother-tongue of 'Thought': James and Wittgenstein on Common Sense". *Cognitio – Revista de Filosofia*, 13 (1), 37-60.
- (2012c). "Streams and River-beds. James' Stream of Thought in Wittgenstein's Manuscripts 165 and 129". *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 4 (2), 36-53.
- (2013). "The 'Pragmatic Maxim' in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*". In Coliva, A., Moyal-Sharrock, D., Munz, V. A. (Eds.), *Mind, Action and Language. Papers of the 36th International Wittgenstein Symposium* (pp. 54-56). Kirchberg am Wechsel: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society.

- Calcaterra, R. M. (2003). “Lo spazio normativo dei sentimenti nell’ottica di Peirce”. In Egidi, R., Dell’Utri, M. e De Caro, M. (Eds.), *Normatività fatti valori* (pp. 135-142). Macerata: Quodlibet.
- Campbell, J. (2001). “Rationality, Meaning, and the Analysis of Delusion”. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 8 (2/3), 89-100.
- Christensen, A. M. (2011). “‘What matters to us?’ Wittgenstein’s *Weltbild*, Rock and Sand, Men and Women”. *Humana.Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 18, 141-162.
- Coliva, A. (2010) *Moore and Wittgenstein. Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- ____ (2013). “Hinges and Certainty. A Précis of *Moore and Wittgenstein. Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense*”. *Philosophia*, 41 (1), 1-12.
- Crary, A. (2005). “Wittgenstein and Ethics: a Discussion with Reference to *On Certainty*”. In Moyal-Sharrock, d. and Brenner, W. H. (Eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein’s On Certainty* (pp. 275-301). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Harrison, B. (2012). *The Epistemology of Know-how*. PhD Thesis, University of Hertfordshire.
- Howat, A. W. (2013). “Regulative Assumptions, Hinge Propositions and the Peircean Conception of Truth”. *Erkenntnis*, 78 (2), 451-468.
- Johanson, A. E. (1994). “Peirce and Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*”. In Debrock, G. and Hulswit, M. (Eds.), *Living Doubt. Essays Concerning the Epistemology of Charles S. Peirce* (pp. 171-186). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Kober, M. (1996). “Certainties of a World-picture: the Epistemological Investigations of *On Certainty*”. In Sluga, H. and Stern, D. G. (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (pp. 411-441). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McGinn, M. (1989). *Sense and Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- ____ (2001). “Saying and Showing and the Continuity of Wittgenstein’s Thought”. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 9 (1), 24-36.
- Medina, J. (2004). “The Meanings of Silence: Wittgensteinian Contextualism and Polyphony”. *Inquiry*, 47 (6), 562-579.
- ____ (2006). *Speaking from Elsewhere*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Menary, R. (2003). “Peirce and Wittgenstein on Doubt. A Comparison”, in *Proceedings of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium* (pp. 230-232). Kirchberg am Wechsel: Austrian Wittgenstein Society.
- Moore. G. E. (1959). *Philosophical Papers*. New York: Macmillan.

- Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2003). "Logic in Action: Wittgenstein's Logical Pragmatism and the Impotence of Skepticism". *Philosophical Investigations*, 26 (2), 125-148.
- ____ (2005a). "Unravelling Certainty". In Moyal-Sharrock, D. and Brenner, W. H. (Eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (pp. 76-100). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- ____ (2005b). *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- ____ (2013). "On Coliva's Judgmental Hinges". *Philosophia*, 41 (1), 13-25.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1931-1935. *Collected Papers. Vol. 5*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Perissinotto, L. (1991). *Logica e immagine del mondo. Studio su Über Gewissheit di Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Milano: Guerini.
- Pihlström, S. (2012). "A New Look at Wittgenstein and Pragmatism". *The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 4 (2), 9-26.
- Rhees, R. (2003). *Wittgenstein's On Certainty. There – Like Our Life*, edited by Dewi Z. Phillips. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rhodes, J. and Gipps, R. G. T. (2008). "Delusions, Certainty, and the Background". *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, 15 (4), 295-310.
- Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ryle, G. (1945). "Knowing How and Knowing That: the Presidential Address". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, 46, 1-16.
- Schulte, J. (2005). "Within a System". In Moyal-Sharrock, D. and Brenner, W. H. (Eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (pp. 59-75). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Stanghellini, G. (2006/2008). *Psicopatologia del senso comune*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Stroll, A. (1994). *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ____ (2004). "Wittgenstein's Foundational Metaphors". In Moyal-Sharrock, D. (Ed.), *The Third Wittgenstein* (pp. 13-24). Adelshot: Ashgate.
- Tiercelin, C. (2010). "Peirce et Wittgenstein Face au Defi Sceptique", *Paradigmi – Rivista di critica filosofica*, 28 (3), 13-28.
- von Wright, G. H. (1972). "Wittgenstein on Certainty", *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge*, 1, 47-70.
- Winch, P. (1998). "Judgment: Propositions and Practices". *Philosophical Investigations*, 21 (3), 189-202.

- Williams, M. (2005). “Why Wittgenstein isn’t a Foundationalist”. In Moyal-Sharrock, D. and Brenner, W. H. (Eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein’s On Certainty* (pp. 47-58). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- (1969/1975). *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (1977/1980). *Culture and Value*. Edited by G. H. Von Wright and H. Nyman. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (1953/2001). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wright, C. (2004a). “Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?”. *Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 78 (1), 167-212.
- (2004b) “Wittgensteinian Certainties”. In McManus, D. (Ed.), *Wittgenstein and Scepticism* (pp. 19-48). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wolgast, E. (1987). “Whether Certainty is a Form of Life”. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (147), 151-165.

Anna Boncompagni is completing her PhD in Philosophy and Theory of Humanities in Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy. She graduated in Communication Sciences (University of Siena, 1998) and in Theoretic Philosophy (University of Florence, 2010). Her research focuses on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy, particularly on its relations with the pragmatist tradition.
Contact: anna.boncompagni@gmail.com