

## Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty

Nigel Pleasants

Received: 4 January 2009 / Revised: 4 March 2009 / Accepted: 16 March 2009 /  
Published online: 18 April 2009  
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009

**Abstract** In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein’s reflections bring into view the phenomenon of basic certainty. He explores this phenomenon mostly in relation to our certainty with regard to empirical states of affairs. Drawing on these seminal observations and reflections, I extend the inquiry into what I call “basic moral certainty”, arguing that the latter plays the same kind of foundational role in our moral practices and judgements as basic empirical certainty does in our epistemic practices and judgements. I illustrate the nature and significance of basic moral certainty via critical examination of contemporary philosophical “explanations” of the wrongness of killing. These pseudo explanations, as I show them to be, will be seen to founder in a similar manner to Moore’s “Proof” of an external world, that is, in a manner that discloses the phenomenon of basic (moral) certainty.

**Keywords** Wittgenstein · Basic certainty · Badness of death · Wrongness of killing

Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* reflections are occasioned by G. E. Moore’s insistence that he *knows* such things to be true as that his hands exist, and that by producing them for display to an audience, accompanied by the words “Here’s one hand and here’s another”, he has thereby proved “the existence of things outside of us” (Moore 1959, 144–5). Wittgenstein objects that “Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows” (OC 151).

Why does Wittgenstein deny that Moore knows that his hands exist? Because Moore is in no position to issue a knowledge-claim about it: “one says ‘I know’ when one is ready to give compelling grounds. ‘I know’ relates to a possibility of demonstrating the

---

An earlier version of this paper entitled ‘Wittgenstein, ethics and basic moral certainty’ was first published in *Inquiry* 51:3, 2008, 24–67. I am grateful to the editor and publisher for permission to draw on some of this material.

---

N. Pleasants (✉)

Department of Sociology & Philosophy, University of Exeter, Room 348 Amory Building,  
Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK  
e-mail: n.j.pleasants@ex.ac.uk

truth” (OC 243). But Moore cannot say, and does not know, *how* he knows that his hands exist, nor can he offer any reasons or evidence to support such a knowledge-claim. Moore just insists, with what Wittgenstein calls “a metaphysical emphasis”, that he really does know what he claims to know (OC 482).<sup>1</sup> Thus Moore question-beggingly asserts what he needs to establish if he is to sustain a genuine knowledge-claim. But how could he go about establishing it? He might take a close look at his hands, touch one with the other, or ask someone else to confirm that they exist. These corroboratory procedures might play a bona fide epistemic role if there were some reason for Moore or his audience to be uncertain whether his hands existed, but the circumstances under which he asserted that he knew they existed were deliberately engineered so as to preclude any such possibility of doubt. The deliverance of any procedure that he might call upon to verify the claim that his hands exist could only be less certain than what he sought to verify by it. As Wittgenstein says, Moore’s “having two hands is as certain as anything [he] could produce in evidence for it”, and so he is “not in a position to take the sight of [his] hand as evidence for it” (OC 250). Not only is Moore’s knowledge-claim recalcitrant to verification by appeal to evidence, grounds or reasons, but any attempt at verification would serve only to undermine his presumed status as a competent epistemic agent.

Reflecting on the bizarreness of attempting to verify the truth of a proposition that one could not doubt, we come to see something of the role that pre-epistemic certainty plays in our lives. This certainty is characterised by the inapplicability of doubt, which comes in a range of strengths and degrees. There are some things which we can doubt only with great difficulty; some which we can *hardly* doubt; and some which we simply *cannot* doubt at all. Examples that Wittgenstein discusses, in addition to the existence of one’s hands, include: the fact that physical objects do not just spring into and out of existence; that the ground under our feet will not suddenly give way; that one has never been to the moon; what one’s name is. In recognition of its fundamentality, I call our attitude towards these states of affairs, following Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2005, 78), “basic certainty”. The objects of our basic certainty are immune to questioning, doubting and testing, but are also beyond verification, affirmation and appeal to evidence, grounds or reasons.

The objects of basic certainty that Wittgenstein examines are such that we are not even aware of our certainty regarding them until it is brought to our attention via the attempt to state it in apparently empirical propositions, the result of which seems absurdly incongruous. But the fact that the objects of basic certainty are incorrigibly certain for us is *shown* in what we do and how we do it. The certainty, as Wittgenstein remarks, is manifested “day in, day out by my actions and also in what I say”; “my life shews that I am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on” (OC 431, 7). It is only because we have an attitude of basic certainty towards innumerable taken-for-granted states of affairs that we are able to perform epistemic operations such as checking, discovering, affirming, justifying, verifying, doubting, questioning, challenging, hypothesising, speculating, etc. What underlies our epistemic practices and capacities is not itself an epistemic practice or capacity, but our fundamental ways of being and acting in the world. Basic certainty performs

<sup>1</sup> Moore contrasts what he says he *knows* to be the case with “merely something which I believed” (1959, 146).

a crucial enabling function in our lives and practices, which Wittgenstein describes metaphorically as the foundation, framework and scaffolding of our thought, judgement, perception, beliefs and assorted epistemic practices.

Most of Wittgenstein's reflections in *On Certainty* concern basic certainty with regard to *empirical* states of affairs. One of his central points is that our attitude towards statements of empirical certainty is of exactly the same kind as that towards mathematical or logical propositions: "If one doesn't marvel at the fact that the propositions of arithmetic...are 'absolutely certain'", Wittgenstein asks, "then why should one be astonished that the proposition 'This is my hand' is so equally?" (OC 448). In this paper I want to broaden Wittgenstein's inquiry by bringing into its purview what I call "basic moral certainty". I will suggest that this kind of certainty occupies a similar foundational position in our moral practices and judgements to that of basic empirical certainty in our epistemic practices and judgements. My focus will be on the badness of death and wrongness of killing, the ethical significance of which are surely fundamental to our personal, interpersonal, and social lives.

Moore tells us that his "Proof of an external world" was motivated by Kant's complaint that it is "a scandal to philosophy" that "the existence of things outside of us must be accepted merely on faith" (Moore 1959, 127). More recently, it has been remarked that "one of the most notorious scandals of moral philosophy" is its inability to "explain why it is wrong to kill people" (Feldman 1992, 157). My aim will be to show that contemporary analytic philosophers' attempts to explain what the wrongness of killing consists in founder in much the same way that Moore's attempted "Proof" of an external world does.

## 2

As it happens, the very same Moore who insisted that he knew that his hands existed, and that his body had never been far from the Earth's surface, had previously averred that the proposition that "universal murder would not be a good thing at this moment can [ ] not be proved" (1903, 156). Moore allows only that "it is *generally* wrong for any single person to commit murder" (1903; my emphasis). We need not go into the reasons for this scepticism, other than to note that Moore invokes a kind of cosmic consequentialism according to which the "speedy extermination of the race" could possibly be a good thing for "the Universe" (1903). But one might think that Moore has made an elementary error here, for is not "wrongful killing" analytic to "murder"?<sup>2</sup> In which case, the wrongness of murder cannot be an open question, and the "murder" that he considered possibly justified should have been called "*killing*", not "*murder*".

Much of moral philosophy and practical ethics is more or less directly concerned with *which* kinds of killing (and allowings-to-die), in *which* circumstances, are permissible, justified, or required. Debate is nearly always over *when*, not *if*, it is wrong to kill, and the wrongness of killing as such is simply taken for granted. The question that is rarely posed is: What makes *wrongful* killing wrong? Of course, the

<sup>2</sup> L. W. Sumner also asserts that "not all instances of murder are morally wrong", and even claims—most implausibly—that "this contention is common to utilitarianism and most other moral theories" (1976, 147).

reason that this question is rarely posed is that the wrongness of killing as such is so blatant that few see any need to ask, never mind answer, it. Nevertheless, as well as allegedly being a scandal to moral philosophy, some philosophers think that if we do not know what makes wrongful killing wrong we cannot know how to judge those highly contentious cases, such as abortion, euthanasia, or the killing of non-human animals, over which there *is* doubt as to *whether*, or *when*, it is wrong to kill. For example, in an influential article on the morality of abortion, Don Marquis asks, rhetorically: “if we merely believe, but do not understand, why killing adult human beings such as ourselves is wrong, how could we conceivably show that abortion is either immoral or permissible?” (1989, 189). (I note in passing the similarity of Marquis’s distinction between “mere belief” and “understanding” to Moore’s distinction between “mere belief” and “knowledge”, both of which clearly derive from Platonic epistemology.) More generally, L. W. Sumner maintains that despite (wrongful) killing being “such an obvious wrong”, its foundational grounding for moral theories demands that its wrongness not be left to “rest on *mere convictions*”. We must, rather, “explain why these convictions are reasonable”. So let us take a look at the kinds of explanation of the obvious wrongness of murder that are on offer.

### 3

The wrongness of (wrongful) killing,<sup>3</sup> one might think, inheres primarily in what the act of killing does to its victim: it renders them *dead* (this is what Wittgenstein would call a “grammatical remark”—cf. “one plays patience by oneself” [PI 248]). Being killed may, but need not, involve physical and psychological suffering. But the *distinctive* harm inflicted by killing is that of being rendered dead, otherwise killing would not differ from assault occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm. The wrongness of killing, then, seemingly must be internally related to the badness of death.

However, many would claim that death is not always bad, or not *all that* bad, if it comes at the end of a reasonably long and satisfying life, and does not involve much suffering. This is the response I have often elicited upon asking people what they think the badness of death consists in. It is often said in everyday conversation that a deceased elderly person had enjoyed “a good innings” or “lived to a ripe old age”; whereas of dead young people, in contrast, it is said that they have been tragically “taken before their time”. Moreover, the conclusion of longstanding, beguiling arguments, originally propounded by the ancient Greek philosophers Epicurus and Lucretius, flatly denies that *any* death, including untimely death, is bad *at all*. There are two main arguments for this conclusion. First, the “no-subject” argument which goes as follows: prior to his death Smith has not died, and so has not suffered the badness of death; but upon his death, Smith no longer exists and then there is no subject left to experience or endure the badness that death supposedly brings him.<sup>4</sup> Therefore death is not a bad thing at all, and its inevitable prospect, whether sooner or later, should trouble no-one. Second, the “symmetry” argument: this is premised

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter just “killing”.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein presumably had this argument in mind when he wrote in the *Tractatus* that “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death” (6.4311).

on the observation that an individual's life is both preceded and succeeded by an infinite expanse of time during which they are non-existent. This leads to the conclusion that, because it would be weird or irrational to fear, dread or regret one's non-existence before one was born, or to pity someone else for being non-existent before they were born, it is equally unwarranted to hold these attitudes towards one's own or others' posthumous non-existence.

The widespread commonsense idea that the badness of death is variable, and the classic arguments that no-one's death is bad for them, raise a troubling puzzle for the seemingly obvious idea that the wrongness of killing is internally related to the badness of death. For if the wrongness of killing is internally related to the badness of death, and the badness of death varies according to its degree of untimeliness, is not the wrongness of killing proportional to the badness of death? If some deaths are much worse than others, should we not judge that some murders are worse than others and that therefore the murder of an elderly person does less wrong to the victim than the murder of a healthy young person does to its victim? That is to say, if the badness of death ranges from tragic to hardly bad at all, should we not conclude that some murders are not so bad and really do little wrong to their victim? Even more disturbingly, the classic "no-subject" and "symmetry" arguments could be seen to entail that *no* killing in which the victim has no foreknowledge of the means of their impending death, and no experience of being killed, is wrong. For the act of killing annihilates the subject of experience, *ipso facto* leaving no victim to suffer the effects of the supposed crime. Moreover, killing someone *ex hypothesis* merely returns them to a state of non-existence identical to their pre-natal non-existence, with regard to which their attitude when alive was one of unperturbed equanimity. Thus killing is the perfect "victimless crime"!

Of course, it would be callous to judge that the murder of someone with a limited amount and quality of life left is not really all that wrong and morally insane to think that no murder of which its victim has neither foreknowledge nor experience of being killed does them any wrong. Thankfully, no contemporary philosopher writing on the wrongness of killing says anything quite so crass (nor did the Ancient philosophers). Contemporary philosophers tend to agree, in opposition to the Ancients, that death, or at least *untimely* death, is bad,<sup>5</sup> and they agree that killing (outside of excusing or justifying circumstances) is "an obvious wrong". Also in opposition to the Ancients, they agree that the badness of death befalls, and the wrongness of killing is done to, the deceased person (though they disagree over exactly *when* the badness of death occurs).

The theories through which contemporary philosophers have sought to explain the badness of death and wrongness of killing are typically couched in terms of the loss or deprivation of something of great value to the victim, and correlatively of the victim having had that valuable possession unjustly taken from them. That which is lost or taken through death or killing is variously identified as: the victim's ability to fulfil desires and pursue projects; the victim's ability to have pleasurable and satisfying experiences, attachments and relations; the victim's hopes and wishes to

<sup>5</sup> There are, however, contemporary defenders of the Ancients' arguments—see, for example, Rosenbaum (1989), Burley (2006).

see various things come to pass in the future. Consider the following selection of such explanations:

- Death is the ultimate loss; murder therefore is the ultimate form of theft (Sumner 1976, 162)
- What makes killing another human being wrong on occasions is its character as an irrevocable, maximally unjust prevention of the realization either of the victim's life-purposes or of such life-purposes as the victim may reasonably have been expected to resume or to come to have (Young 1979, 519)
- Killing inflicts (one of) the greatest possible losses on the victim (Marquis 1989, 189)
- [What makes] killing us wrong, in general, is that it causes premature death. Premature death is a misfortune, in general, because it deprives an individual of a future of value (Marquis 1997, 96)
- Murder, I suggest, is harmful to its victim because it is an irreversible loss to the person who was murdered of a function or functions necessary for his worthwhile existence (Levenbook 1984: 412)

I shall refer to these (and other kindred) “explanations” as “deprivation explanations”. They share the following core features:

Firstly, deprivation explanations locate the wrongness of killing in the loss or deprivation that the act imposes on the victim. Thus they face the disturbing implication mentioned earlier, that when a victim has little life of value left, killing them does them no great harm, hence the wrong done to them is not so great, or nowhere near as great as that done to someone murdered in their prime. Secondly, deprivation explanations clearly require that there be a victim that suffers the various losses and deprivations that they say constitutes the badness of death. But although proponents of these theories reject the conclusion of the classic “no-subject” argument (i.e. that no death, even untimely death, is a bad thing), they fail to overcome the conundrum that it poses of there being no subject to bear the various deprivations, losses, harms and injustices that their theories presuppose. Thirdly, however, in spite of these theoretical problems, there is in my view an even greater deficiency of deprivation explanations. It is simply that they egregiously fail to do what they claim to do, namely, to *explain* the wrongness of killing.

It is telling, I think, that deprivation explanations are conceptually parasitic on our ordinary language talk of the deceased “losing” their life and the murder victim having their life “taken” or “stolen” from them. Despite the apparent sophistication of their formulation, deprivation explanations bring no enlightenment to our ordinary ways of talking about the badness of death and wrongness of killing. I am tempted to suggest that they are ensnared in the “limits of language” that Wittgenstein claimed, in his 1930 “Lecture on ethics”, is the inescapable condition of all “apparently” ethical propositions. At that time Wittgenstein continued to espouse his *Tractarian* doctrine of ethical ineffability, which held that “it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics”; “ethics cannot be put into words” (TLP 6.42, 6.421).

In his Lecture on ethics, Wittgenstein argued that when we utter or entertain seemingly ethical propositions such as “X is right”, or “X has intrinsic value”, we think we know what we mean thereby, but in fact the evaluative content of the proposition is

nothing more than simile and allegory. We do not see this because we conflate “two very different senses” of value, which Wittgenstein called “the relative” and “the ethical” (LE 5). Only the relative sense of value can be spoken of sensefully, as in propositions such as “this is the right way to Granchester”. Propositions which seem to convey a distinctively ethical sense of “right”, “good”, or “value”, such as “‘This is a good fellow’”, or “‘This man’s life was valuable’”, are merely analogical or metaphorical extensions of the relative sense of value (LE 9). These apparently ethical propositions use the predicates “good” and “valuable” by way of “some sort of analogy” with such propositions as “‘This is a good football player’ ” or “This piece of jewellery is valuable (LE 9). We can specify what “good” and “valuable” mean in these non-ethical propositions by reference to the states of affairs that constitute good and valuable in those contexts. Thus good footballers score a lot of goals, read the game presciently, etc., and valuable pieces of jewellery are worth a lot of money. But with apparently ethical propositions, we can only say that “good” and “valuable” mean something like what they mean when used in the non-ethical, relative sense, only something of a different, “higher” (unspecifiable) order of goodness and value. Thus for Wittgenstein, at this time, apparently ethical propositions are “mere nonsense” (LE 10).

I believe that this analysis of ethical propositions is untenable and I think Wittgenstein abandoned it in his later philosophy (see Pleasants 2008). Nevertheless, I do want to suggest that his notion of a class of propositions being constrained by the “limits of language” has a more restrictive application, and aptly characterises deprivation explanations of the badness of death and wrongness of killing. I contend that the concepts of losing and taking something of value, on which deprivation explanations are parasitic, are incapable of stating just *how bad* death, and *how wrong* murder, are. In saying that the deceased “loses” her life, and that the murderer “takes” his victim’s life, our ability to articulate the badness and wrongness involved is limited by the senses of “losing” and “taking” that those concepts have when applied to a *living* subject who loses something of value or has something of value unjustly taken from them. Losses, deprivations and thefts are borne and experienced by a living subject. But to *explain* the badness and wrongness of the *end* or *ending* of that which makes it possible for a subject to undergo losses, deprivations and thefts in terms of it being just another (albeit “one of the greatest or gravest possible”) loss, deprivation or theft, is woefully inadequate to the momentousness of what death and killing *are*. When used in philosophical propositions that purport to explain the badness of the *end*, or wrongness of the *ending*, of a life, rather than to a loss or theft endured by a living person, the meaning of those concepts becomes as perplexing as the proposition “‘it’s 5 o’clock on the sun’”, or “the application of ‘above’ and ‘below’ to the earth” (Wittgenstein, PI 350–1).

The ensnarement of deprivation explanations in the “limits of language” is a function not of them being ethical propositions, but rather of their objects being basic certainties. The primary symptom of a basic certainty is that when an attempt is made at putting an unquestionable truism into propositional form in a real-life context the effect is a mixture of absurdity, mirth, incongruity, bemusement and offensiveness. Statements taking the form: “Death is bad because...” or “Killing is wrong because...” may *look* like ethical propositions, but contemplation on the effect of offering or receiving such an “explanation” in a real-life context shows them rather to be *expressions* of basic moral certainty. Consider the effect of

proffering a deprivation theory as an explanation in a real conversational setting. For example, imagine saying in all seriousness and sincerity such things as:

Killing is wrong because it is an irrevocable, maximally unjust prevention of the realisation of the victim's life-purposes;

or

Murder is harmful to its victim because it is an irreversible loss to the person who was murdered of a function or functions necessary for his worthwhile existence.

Or imagine writing in, or receiving, a letter of condolence that says:

“death is troubling partly because it involves a sharp decline from being a recipient of life's benefits to not being a recipient of those benefits” (F. M. Kamm, paraphrased by Draper 1999, 409n24).

As with Moore's statements on the existence of his hands, these purportedly explanatory propositions state things that are true—death does indeed bring about a loss of bodily and mental functions necessary for existence, and a curtailment of future possibilities. But the fact of their being true merely exacerbates the absurdity, incongruity, etc of uttering them in real situations.

My claim that deprivation theories are irremediably ensnared in something like the “limits of language” is no criticism of our ordinary language propositions on the dead loosing their lives and the murdered having their lives taken. These propositions function perfectly well in the language-games via which we make moral judgements and express sadness, abhorrence and outrage at the actual deaths and killings we encounter and contemplate. The metaphorical language of lives lost and taken only becomes problematic when it is used to form the active ingredient of philosophical theories purporting either to disclose in what the badness of death and wrongness of killing consists, or to justify the conviction that death really is bad and killing really is wrong. Such theories are either tautologies dressed up as explanations, or utterly banal understatements of the blatantly obvious. That death deprives its victim of their future, and that it causes the loss of functions that are necessary for worthwhile (or any) existence, is an analytic entailment of the concept “death”. That killing is wrong because it causes premature death or prevents realisation of the victim's life-purposes, are just banal understatements. As Horatio said to Hamlet, “There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave to tell us this”.<sup>6</sup> Deprivation theories on the badness of death and wrongness of killing simply rephrase in grandiloquent philosophical language what everyone already knows just in virtue of being able to use the concepts “death”, “killing” and murder appropriately. Mere (re)statements of what everyone already knows clearly neither explain nor justify what they already know.

#### 4

Every competent moral agent regards murder as morally abhorrent. But how would ordinary people respond to the question that deprivation theorists claim to answer,

<sup>6</sup> Act I, scene V.



namely: “What *is* wrong with murder?”? The typical response, I suggest, would be one of puzzlement and vexation, not knowing how to answer the question, and very likely not knowing whether to take it seriously. Wittgenstein says on a number of occasions in *On Certainty* that were we to encounter someone who asserted either that he knew, or that he doubted, the truth of a proposition stating a basic empirical certainty we would have reason to doubt his sanity. Likewise, were we to encounter someone who asserted either that he knew, or that he doubted, that murder is wrong we would have reason to regard him as an incompetent or corrupt moral agent.

If empirical belief, judgement, and enquiry presuppose the spatial and temporal existence of things, then moral belief, judgement and reflection presuppose the badness of death and the wrongness of inflicting it on others. Empirical methods of inquiry, evidence and justification cannot be boot-strappingly deployed to “Prove” the objectivity and temporality of things in the empirical domain. Similarly, the concepts of the badness and wrongness of things suffered by, and done to, living persons cannot be deployed to evaluate the badness of their lives ending, or to explain the wrongness of taking them.

A moral analogue to Moore’s attempt to prove the existence of things in space and time would be to assert, whilst pointing to some particular child on a playground, “I *know* that it would be wrong to kill this child!” That it is wrong to kill an innocent, non-threatening person is just as certain as any logical or analytic truth, or any object of basic empirical certainty. This certainty is manifest in how we live and act, how we respond to particular deaths and killings and in what we say with the ethical propositions that we produce as expressions of sadness and condemnation at such events and acts. We condemn particular killings *because* they involve the killing of innocents. So we might say that it was wrong of Smith to kill Jones *because* his victim was an innocent and non-threatening person; but then to add “and it is wrong to kill innocent and non-threatening people” would not merely be redundant, it would betray a lack of moral sensibility.

Because of the role and significance that death, and hence killing, has for us as embodied, finite, vulnerable beings, the statements “death is bad” and “murder is wrong” are not moral propositions but expressions of basic moral certainty. Just as no-one in non-extraordinary circumstances is in a position to say *how* they know that they have hands, so no-one can say what the badness of death and wrongness of killing consist in. As we have seen, philosophers’ attempts to explain the badness of death and wrongness of killing do not just fail to do so; their *explanans* are spectacularly inadequate to the *explanandum*. We cannot sensibly affirm or prove that death is bad and killing wrong because there is no evidence, reasons, or grounds to justify any claim that they are so. We *have* no evidence, reasons, or grounds for regarding death as bad and killing wrong, just as we have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for acting in ways that presuppose that we believe our hands will not fall off in use, or that we are incorrigibly authoritative on what our name is. What Wittgenstein says of “the language-game”—by which he means Our characteristic manner of going on in the world—serves as an even more poignantly apposite characterisation of our basic certainty towards the badness of death and wrongness of killing:

... it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).  
It is there—like our life. (OC 559)

## 5

We have seen both that Ancient philosophers' attempts to prove that death is not bad at all, and contemporary philosophers' attempts to justify and explain the badness of death and wrongness of killing, yield strikingly peculiar results. The Ancient arguments carry the unpalatable implication that no unforeseen and painless killing is wrong, and contemporary deprivation theories carry the unpalatable implication that some murders are not all that wrong. But the Ancient arguments no more unsettle our convictions on the badness of death and wrongness of killing than contemporary philosophical explanations that purport to explain and justify them succeed in doing so. Because they are basic certainties, the badness of death and wrongness of killing are beyond doubt or affirmation, and are refractory to justification or explanation.

I have also noted that non-philosophers too are inclined to distinguish between deaths that are tragic or very bad and deaths that are hardly bad at all, and therefore also seem committed to carrying that distinction over to evaluating the wrongness of murders variably. In fact people do not judge that those murders wherein the victim had little quality of life left are not all that bad: no-one would say (or think): "well, at least Mr. Smith was murdered at a ripe old age", or "he had a good innings before he was murdered"; nor would anyone say of the murder of a terminally ill patient that it was a "merciful release". This is indicative of the wrongness of murder being a basic certainty that is not based on any more basic judgements to do with the amount of loss thereby inflicted on the victim. Murder is wrong because it causes death; but the "because" in this statement is "grammatical", not explanatory. Nothing explains what makes death bad and murder wrong because any explanation will invoke bads and wrongs (loss, deprivation, theft, etc) the badness and wrongness of which is much less weighty than the objects of the supposed explanation.

However, it might be objected that some deaths really are *not* bad and some killings really are *not* wrong, hence neither the badness of death nor the wrongness of killing are basic moral certainties. But basic certainty attaches to paradigmatic cases of the kind, not to all possible ones, and this is the same for empirical as for moral or ethical judgement and perception. Although Moore's claim to know that his hands existed is a paradigm case of basic empirical certainty, it has often been pointed out in qualification that there could be extraordinary circumstances in which someone might be mistaken or unsure as to whether their hands exist—in the turmoil of the battlefield, for example. It should be noted, though, that this counterexample itself presupposes the hand-owner's basic certainty over the existence of their hands, namely, the certainty that their hands existed before the battle (thus the battlefield uncertainty is whether their hands *still* exist).

The fact that in some circumstances death may not be bad, or rather not the worst outcome, and killing may not be wrong, does not undermine basic certainty of their badness and wrongness in paradigmatic cases. For death is only not bad, perhaps, when it brings unbearable suffering to an end, the badness of which is itself a basic certainty. In such a case death is still bad in that a life has come to an end, but the alternative of unbearably painful existence, wherein worthwhile life has ceased anyway, is worse still. Likewise, Killing is only not wrong, perhaps, when done to save someone from unbearable suffering, or to save others (including oneself, self-defensively) from being killed, the badness and wrongness of which are themselves

basic certainties. Thus basic certainty remains an essential condition of those special circumstances in which particular deaths may not be the worst outcome and particular killings may not be wrong.

Some people may be concerned that the concept of basic moral certainty connotes conservatism, absolutism, unreflectiveness and unrevisability. But the certainty of which I have been speaking has nothing to do with the certainty of someone who is convinced that their moral and political opinions and judgements are infallibly correct. It is rather an attitude towards death and killing that underlies everyone's—conservative, liberal or radical—moral and political opinions and judgements (cf. Wittgenstein on the fundamentality of agreement in human intercourse, “not agreement in opinions but in form of life” [PI 241]). One could say, paraphrasing Wittgenstein (OC 341), that basic moral certainty on the badness of death and wrongness of killing functions as the “hinge” on which enquiry into the rightness or permissibility of particular acts, practices and institutions involving the death and killing of various kinds and states of beings turns. The concept of basic moral certainty may then serve as a reminder that without such a “hinge” or “foundation” we would not be able to enter into moral inquiry or argument, or make moral judgments, at all.<sup>7</sup>

## References

- Burley, M. (2006). Anticipating annihilation. *Inquiry*, 49(2), 170–185.
- Draper, K. (1999). Disappointment, sadness, and death. *The Philosophical Review*, 108, 387–414.
- Feldman, F. (1992). *Confrontations with the reaper: Philosophical study of the nature and value of death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levenbook, B. (1984). Harming someone after his death. *Ethics*, 94, 407–419.
- Marquis, D. (1989). Why abortion is immoral. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86, 183–202.
- Marquis, D. (1997). An argument that abortion is wrong. In H. LaFollette (Ed.), *Ethics in practice*, pp. 91–102. Oxford: Blackwell. (revised version of Marquis 1989).
- Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Moore, G. E. (1959) Proof of an external world. In *Philosophical papers*. London: Allen & Unwin, 127–150.
- Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2005). Unravelling certainty. In D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. Brenner (Eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein's on certainty*, (pp. 76–99). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Pleasants, N. (2008). Wittgenstein, ethics and basic moral certainty. *Inquiry*, 51(3), 241–267.
- Rosenbaum, S. (1989). The symmetry argument: Lucretius against the fear of death. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 353–373.
- Sumner, L. (1976). A matter of life and death. *Noûs*, 10, 145–171.
- Young, R. (1979). What is so wrong with killing people? *Philosophy*, 54, 515–528.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Danièle Moyal-Sharrock for her encouragement on this paper, and for her perceptively helpful comments on its various drafts; thanks also to participants at the 2008 inaugural British Wittgenstein Society conference, especially Mikel Burley, who made me rethink some of my original claims.