

# A Discussion Between Wittgenstein and Moore on *Certainty* (1939): From the Notes of Norman Malcolm

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In April 1939, G. E. Moore read a paper to the Cambridge University Moral Science Club entitled ‘Certainty’. In it, amongst other things, Moore made the claims that: (i) the phrase ‘it is certain’ could be used with sense-experience-statements, such as ‘I have a pain’, to make statements such as ‘It is certain that I have a pain’; and that (ii) sense-experience-statements can be said to be certain in the same sense as some material-thing-statements can be—namely in the sense that they can be safely counted on. When Moore later read his paper to Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein took violent exception to it, and the two entered into a heated exchange. The only known notes of this exchange are a previously unpublished verbatim record of part of it, taken by Norman Malcolm. This paper is an edition of Malcolm’s notes. These notes are valuable for both philosophical and scholarly reasons. They give us a glimpse of a sustained exchange between Wittgenstein and a real-life interlocutor; they contain a defence by Wittgenstein of the idea that a word’s use can illuminate its meaning; and they provide evidence of Wittgenstein’s philosophical engagement with the topic of certainty, and with Moore’s thought on it, long before he began to write the notes which make up *On Certainty*, in 1949.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On 22 February 1937 John Wisdom read a paper to the Aristotelian Society which was entitled ‘Philosophical Perplexity’. Wisdom had

<sup>1</sup> For broader discussion of some of the topics touched on in this introduction, see van Gennip 2008.

attended Wittgenstein's lectures between 1934 and 1936 (Klagge 2003, pp. 346–7), and his paper was heavily influenced by what he had learnt from them. In a footnote near the beginning of his paper, Wisdom acknowledged Wittgenstein's influence as follows:

Wittgenstein has not read this over-compressed paper and I warn people against supposing it a closer imitation of Wittgenstein than it is. On the other hand I can hardly exaggerate the debt I owe to him and how much of the good in this work is his—not only in the treatment of this philosophical difficulty and that but in the matter of how to do philosophy. As far as possible I have put a W against examples I owe to him. It must not be assumed that they are used in a way he would approve. (Wisdom 1937, p. 72, n. 1)

In sections 1–5 of his paper Wisdom discussed the nature of philosophical statements—that is, of philosophical questions and their answers. For most of the rest of the paper, in sections 6–7, Wisdom sought to illustrate the various claims he had made about philosophical statements by looking at the notions of knowledge and certainty, and in particular by examining what he called 'the *knowledge* or *pointless doubt* puzzle[s]' (Wisdom 1937, p. 78). In the course of his discussion Wisdom said that 'in ordinary language we speak both of some favourable material-thing-statements and of statements about our sensations, as certain' (Wisdom 1937, p. 84); but he insisted that there is a distinction between the certainty belonging to sense-experience-statements and the certainty belonging to material-thing-statements:

[T]he difference between statements about sense-experiences and statements about material things is ... not one of subject-matter (stuff) but of a different manner of use (style). And statements about sense-experiences are certain only because it makes no sense to say that they may be wrong. Notice the connexion between "He says he is in pain but I think he is mistaken" and "He cries 'Ow!' but I think he is mistaken." ... [Sometimes] after considering hallucinations, illusions, etc., one wishes to emphasize ... the unlikeness between even so well assured a statement as "This is my thumb" and such a statement as "I see a pinkish patch," "I feel a softish patch," "I am in pain." (Wisdom 1937, pp. 82–3)

Just over two years later—on 21 April 1939—G. E. Moore read a paper to the Cambridge University Moral Science Club, entitled 'Certainty'. In this paper Moore took up some of the claims about knowledge and certainty which Wisdom had made in his Aristotelian

Society paper. The following are Theodore Redpath's official minutes of Moore's presentation to the Club:<sup>2</sup>

Prof. Moore read a paper called: 'Certainty'. The paper was concerned with 'certainty' in the sense in which contingent or empirical matters of fact can be said to be 'certain': and with the use of the phrase 'It's certain that ...' rather than such phrases as 'I'm certain that ...' or 'I feel certain that ...'. Prof. Moore began by considering a remark in Mr Wisdom's paper to the Aristotelian Society, Feb. 1937, on 'Philosophical Perplexity', namely: 'Statements about sense-experiences are certain only because it makes no sense to say that they may 'be wrong' ' [Wisdom 1937, p. 82]. Prof. Moore suggested that Mr Wisdom held that the word 'certain' is used in two different senses; in one sense when it is said truly 'It's certain that I am in pain', & in another sense when it is said truly 'It's certain that this is a thumb' [Wisdom 1937, p. 83]. Prof. Moore thought Mr Wisdom went on further to make a suggestion as to what the sense is in which it may be truly said 'It's certain that I am in pain': but did not suggest what the sense of 'certain' is in which it may truly be said 'It's certain that this is my thumb'. What this sense was puzzled Prof. Moore. The positive proposition that it makes no sense to say that a sense-statement may be wrong seemed to Prof. Moore to be true. Why only seemed? Oughtn't it to be certain one way or the other? What evidence can be brought forward one way or the other? In what sense does it 'not make sense'? And what other propositions follow from this? The following: 'I think I'm in pain' does not make sense': 'I think I'm not in pain' does not make sense': 'I doubt whether I'm in pain or not' does not make sense': 'I don't know whether I'm in pain or not' does not make sense': also a queer one which Mr Wisdom gave: 'He says he's in pain, but I think he's mistaken' makes no sense' [Wisdom 1937, p. 81]. Wisdom might have taken 'He says he's in pain but he's mistaken'. This would have been better for the purpose of showing the sense in which he can be certain. The point was that the only intelligible alternatives if a man says 'I'm in pain' are that he knows he is, or knows he isn't, & is lying.

As to the question why it doesn't make sense this might mean either: 'How does one prove it doesn't?' or 'In what sense doesn't it?' Mr Wisdom had answered the latter question by saying 'It has no use in English' [Wisdom 1937, p. 81]. This answer was unintelligible to Moore. Moore was inclined to say that the sense in which it doesn't make sense is similar to that in which 'Smith was between Jones' doesn't.

Moore said he did not know how to prove that it doesn't make sense.

Wisdom made a further attempt to help one to see the sense in which the sentence 'He says he's in pain but I think he's mistaken' makes no sense by asking one to observe the connexion between it and 'He cries

<sup>2</sup> The full text of Moore's paper has recently been published as Moore 1993b, under an amended title. This full text significantly supplements the minutes which are presented here.

‘Ow!’ but I think he’s mistaken’ [Wisdom 1937, p. 82]. This also seemed unsatisfactory to Moore. The expression ‘Ow!’ makes no assertion.

Moore then went back to the remark of Wisdom’s with which he began.<sup>3</sup> This remark suggested that ‘It’s certain I’m in pain’ just means ‘It makes no sense to say ‘Perhaps I’m not.’ This seemed certainly wrong to Moore, because ‘It’s certain that I’m in pain’ entails ‘I’m in pain’, whereas ‘It makes no sense to say I’m not in pain’ does not.

It might be said that ‘only because’ doesn’t really deny this, & that Wisdom really meant: ‘It’s certain I’m in pain’ is equivalent to ‘I’m in pain & it makes no sense to say: ‘Perhaps I’m not’. But this didn’t satisfy Moore either: because it seemed to him that the use of ‘certain’ in ‘It’s certain I’m in pain’ is more like that of ‘It’s certain this is a thumb’ than this would allow.

Moore thought that the common element was that in either case that which was said to be certain could be safely counted on in making deliberations. Wisdom’s statement did not take account of this common element. (Redpath 1939)<sup>4</sup>

The full text of Moore’s paper contains an illustration of what he took to be the ‘common element’ between the certainty of sense-experience-statements and the certainty of material-thing-statements:

In considering the pros and cons for a course of action we often try to separate out the *certainties* relevant to a decision from the mere probabilities: the certainties being things we can *safely* count on. And for this purpose it seems to me that sense-statements may be reckoned as certainties in exactly the same sense as thing-statements. For instance, if the question is: Shall I attend the meeting of the philosophical society tonight? We might say: It’s certain I’ve got this nasty pain; it’s certain it only began half an hour ago; and it’s certain that, when I’ve had it before, it’s always lasted at least four hours and has made me quite incapable of following an argument while it lasted. Here the certainty that I’ve got the pain seems to me to play just the same sort of part in this deliberation as the certainty of thing-statements does in others: e.g., as the certainty that there’s plenty of hot water in the boiler may play in a deliberation as to whether you shall have a bath: they’re both things that can be *safely* counted on. (Moore 1993b, p. 205)

Because Moore had read his paper at a ‘starred meeting’ of the Club—that is, a meeting which faculty of the university were not allowed to attend—Wittgenstein had not been present. However,

<sup>3</sup> Namely, the remark that ‘statements about sense-experiences are certain only because it makes no sense to say that they may be wrong’ (Wisdom 1937, p. 81).

<sup>4</sup> I have silently expanded abbreviations, omitted crossed-out letters and words, and incorporated into the flow of the text any words or phrases that Redpath inserted between the lines.

not long after the meeting, Wittgenstein heard reports of what Moore had said. Norman Malcolm—in his memoir of Wittgenstein—described what happened, as follows:

In 1939, G. E. Moore read a paper to the Moral Science Club on an evening when Wittgenstein did not attend. Moore was attempting to prove in his paper that a person can know that he has such and such a sensation, e.g. pain. This was in opposition to the view, originating with Wittgenstein, that the concepts of knowledge and certainty have no application to one's own sensations (see *Philosophical Investigations*, §246).<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein subsequently heard about Moore's paper and reacted like a war-horse. He came to Moore's at-home, on the following Tuesday. G. H. von Wright, C. Lewy, Smythies and myself were there, and perhaps one or two others. Moore re-read his paper and Wittgenstein immediately attacked it. He was more excited than I ever knew him to be in a discussion. He was full of fire and spoke rapidly and forcefully. He put questions to Moore but frequently did not give Moore a chance to answer. This went on for at least two hours, with Wittgenstein talking almost continuously, Moore getting in a very few remarks, and scarcely a word said by anyone else. Wittgenstein's brilliance and power were impressive and even frightening. When he was discussing this meeting with Smythies some days later, the latter suggested that Wittgenstein had been rude to Moore, in not allowing him to reply. Wittgenstein scoffed at this suggestion as preposterous. But when he next saw Moore he asked, 'Do you think I was rude to you in that discussion?'—to which Moore replied, 'Yes, you were.' I heard that Wittgenstein then made a stiff and reluctant apology. (Malcolm 1958, pp. 30–1)<sup>6</sup>

Moore's diary tells the same story more tersely. His entry for 2 May 1939 reads: 'Very large At Home where W. criticises me'; and the entry for 3 May reads: '[Wittgenstein] meets me with T.<sup>7</sup> & says 3

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein writes:

If we are using the word 'know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know if I'm in pain.—Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself!—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I'm in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour—for I cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

This much is true: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself. (Wittgenstein 2009, §246)

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm appended a footnote to the above passage, which reads: 'After reading the above, Mr. Yorick Smythies informs me that it is his present recollection that the issue of 'rudeness' was first raised by Moore himself when he accidentally met Wittgenstein in the street, and that Wittgenstein thereafter discussed the matter with either Smythies or Lewy' (Malcolm 1958, p. 31).

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Moore's son, Timothy.

people had told him he treated me as if stupid: apologises' (Moore 1929–39, p. 9).

Norman Malcolm took notes of part of the charged exchange between Wittgenstein and Moore, and a typescript of these notes has been in unofficial circulation among Wittgenstein scholars for some years. It is not clear who made the typescript, but it is entitled 'A Discussion between Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty'; and underneath the title the following appears in brackets: 'The summary is by Malcolm. The report of the discussion is incomplete but the fragments which appear here are verbatim'. What follows in section 2 of this paper is a reproduction of the entirety of this typescript, apart from the title and bracketed note just quoted. It begins with what is presumably Malcolm's brief introduction to the exchange, and then moves on to his notes of the exchange itself. Malcolm's notes have been reproduced word for word, his punctuation unchanged, and even his page layout has been retained as faithfully as possible. All the footnotes to section 2, however, are my own.

There are a number of reasons why these notes are valuable—both philosophical and scholarly. From a philosophical perspective, they give us a rare and illuminating glimpse into a sustained exchange between Wittgenstein and a real-life interlocutor—allowing us to observe the ways in which Wittgenstein would try to convince his interlocutors of certain grammatical truths, and how he responded when his interlocutors failed to be convinced.<sup>8</sup> One particularly interesting aspect of this exchange is Wittgenstein's defence of his method of appealing to a word's use (or lack thereof) to illuminate its meaning (or lack thereof). From a scholarly perspective, these notes provide new evidence of Wittgenstein's philosophical engagement with the topic of certainty—and indeed with Moore's thought on this topic—long before 1949 when he started writing the notes that have since been published as *On Certainty*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the best other example of such an interaction is that between Wittgenstein and Alan Turing, recorded intermittently throughout Wittgenstein 1976.

<sup>9</sup> In this connection Rush Rhees reported that Wittgenstein often spoke to him of Moore's 'Defence of Common Sense' (Moore 1925) long before 1949. Indeed, Rhees said that prior to 1946 Wittgenstein had told Moore that he thought that the 'Defence of Common Sense' was Moore's best paper, and Moore had agreed (see Wittgenstein and Rhees 2015, p. 53 [Sect. 21.10]).

## 2. Discussion between Wittgenstein and Moore on *certainty* (2 May 1939), from the notes of Norman Malcolm<sup>10</sup>

Wittgenstein was attacking Moore's suggestion that "it's certain that" has the same meaning with sense-statements as with thing-statements. This suggestion was made in opposition to Wisdom's view that "it's certain that I'm in pain" is equivalent to "I'm in pain and it doesn't make sense to say, perhaps I'm not in pain."

Moore thought that the use of "it's certain that" in this connection was very like its use with thing-statements...<sup>11</sup> that it meant the same as "it can be safely counted on," when this latter is used with thing-statements. Thus Moore was attempting to deny that the certainty of sense-statements depends on linguistic facts, namely that certain expressions don't have a use or don't make sense. He was urging that thing-statements and sense-statements are certain in the same way, and that the knowledge of sense-statements is the same sort of thing as the knowledge of thing-statements.

The Wisdom view was that knowledge of sense-statements is not really knowledge—meaning not at all the same sort of thing as the knowledge of thing-statements.

Wittgenstein was trying to refute Moore by showing that no use of "it's certain that" with sense-statements is overwhelmingly natural, or like its use with thing-statements.

Witt: Has anyone here ever heard the expression, "It's certain I've got a pain"? Why is it so rarely used? In the sort of case Moore describes,<sup>12</sup> the use of "it's certain" is redundant, isn't it? It's a little luxury which you indulge in, or does it say more than "I'm in pain"? In some cases, adding "it's certain" does make a difference, but can you think of any case in which this would happen with "I'm in pain"? (I've a pain. Are you sure? No.) I have a right to ask you how any English expression is used, this one included.

Moore: You know how it's used as well as I do.

<sup>10</sup> A typescript of these notes can be found in The von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives, University of Helsinki (Wittgenstein Materials: 403). Permission to publish the notes has been kindly granted by Ruth Malcolm.

<sup>11</sup> This ellipsis is in the typescript and does not indicate that any words have been omitted in this edition.

<sup>12</sup> See the case described on p. 76 above, in the quotation from Moore 1993b, p. 205.

- Witt: I didn't know it was used. And whom do we ask whether an English expression is used or not? If we don't know, who does?
- Moore: How about the use of "it's certain" with thing-statements? Does its use add anything, in your sense of use? There is a use of "I'm in pain" which is equivalent to "it's certain I'm in pain."
- Witt: Are they substitutable?
- Moore: No.
- Witt: Then what is the difference in their use?
- Moore: I don't know.
- Witt: I can't understand it. How have you learned these expressions? You have learned them and understand them. Why can't you tell the difference if there is one?
- Moore: What is the difference between the use of thing-statements and their use with "it's certain"?
- Witt: This is easy to do. Take "it's certain that this is a piece of cheese."<sup>13</sup> We use "it's certain" when there's been a doubt and we've settled the doubt. We can describe cases where just "this is cheese" would be used, and other cases in which we would say instead "it's certain this is cheese."
- Moore: A clear thing you've said is that when you've been in doubt you apply tests, and then say "it's certain."
- Witt: Another sort of case is "Do you just believe this or is it certain?" Meaning "is there good evidence or did you just conjecture this?" Now these are facts about the use of "it's certain" which you might teach a child or a foreigner. You teach them the occasions on which it is used.
- Moore: Why is it used on these occasions? Aren't you saying something about these occasions when you use the expression? And what are you saying?

<sup>13</sup> Wisdom had introduced the example of knowing that there is cheese on the table (Wisdom 1937, pp. 78 ff.), and Moore had mentioned it in his paper (Moore 1993b, p. 198).

Witt: How do you teach a man the meaning of “Pick it up”? When do you say he understands it? First, there is a primitive block of circumstances and then there are all sorts of exceptions. It’s not simply that it’s when we say it and he picks it up.

Have you ever heard anyone use “It’s certain this is a thumb”?

Moore: But it’s perfectly easy to imagine circumstances in which everyone would say it and recognize it as a natural usage.

Witt: Take “It’s certain this is my thumb.” One can imagine circumstances in which one might say this, e.g., when the fingers were crossed in a certain way. Take “It’s certain that I’m in pain.” We can imagine that it was bad grammar, or we can imagine that some people use it when they mean they have a strong toothache. This won’t satisfy you because you don’t want any sense but a sense analogous to the other uses of “it’s certain.” But what is analogous? Mightn’t one say it is analogous? That is why I suggested that it was to mean strong toothache instead of weak...<sup>14</sup> because there is a greater temptation to say it is analogous.

Moore: Do you mean that one thing can’t be more analogous to something than another?

Witt: I mean that the use of analogy may be fixed already or we may fix it. How do you decide whether an expression has sense? If it’s natural to use it on certain occasions, meaning most people would be inclined to use it on certain occasions, or would say that it means the same as some other expression?

“Are you sure you’ve a pain?” may be said when one suspects a person of lying. And the answer, “I’m sure” might be given in such circumstances. Does this mean the same as “I’m not lying when I say, I’m not<sup>15</sup> in pain”?

<sup>14</sup> This ellipsis is in the typescript and does not indicate that any words have been omitted in this edition.

<sup>15</sup> Presumably this ‘not’ is a mistake, and the sentence should read ‘I’m not lying when I say, I’m in pain’.

Does “the King is striding” have the same use as “the King is walking”? Is chess played on a board the same game as chess played by writing? One may say “It’s essentially the same game,” but this depends on what we are calling essential then. It depends on what is the point at the time. “It’s certain I’ve a pain” is an odd-job phrase. None of its uses seem overwhelmingly natural or important. “It’s certain that” with thing-statements is overwhelmingly natural. Its use is very frequent. There are several different uses each of which is overwhelmingly natural.

Moore: I’m still puzzled about the use of “it’s certain” with thing-statements. And I’m not satisfied by your saying that there’s no puzzle if we consider the occasions on which it’s used, e.g., you say we use it when we’ve been in doubt and the doubt is settled. But to say that the doubt’s been settled is, it seems to me, to say “it’s certain.” That is, I’m thinking there’s a difference between its meaning and its use, and it’s used on certain occasions because it has a certain meaning.

Witt: If you were in the land of the negros and they said “Boo Hoo,” how would you find out what it meant? Certainly by observing what they do when they use it.

We also learn whether “it’s certain” is meant to give information and what information by observing the occasion on which it’s used and taught.

Moore: Does “It’s certain this is cheese” give the same information as “It’s cheese”?

Witt: If the people act the same on the occasions I will say “they give essentially the same information” insisting on essen-  
tially because it’s a vague word.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank: Ruth Malcolm for permission to publish Norman Malcolm’s notes; Peter Hacker for bringing the notes to my attention and providing me with a copy of them; Thomas Wallgren and Bernt Österman for answering my questions about the typescript of the notes located in The von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Helsinki; the Secretaries of the Cambridge Moral Science Club for permission to publish Theodor Redpath’s minutes of the 21 April 1939 meeting, which can be found in the

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Cambridge University Library Archives; Thomas Baldwin for permission to publish from G. E. Moore's diary notes, which can be found in the G. E. Moore Collection in the Cambridge University Library Archives; and Thomas Baldwin, Rachel Bayefsky, and David Stern, for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

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