

Wittgenstein's
On Certainty

There – Like Our Life

Rush Rhees

Edited by D. Z. Phillips

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).

It is there – like our life.

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On Certainty

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Rush Rhees

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First published 2003 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rhees, Rush.

Wittgenstein's On certainty : there – like our life / Rush Rhees ; edited by D.Z. Phillips.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-40510-579-8 (alk. paper)

1. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1889–1951. über Gewissheit. 2. Certainty.
I. Phillips, D.Z. (Dewi Zephaniah) II. Title.

B3376.W563 U3 2002

121'.63—dc21

2002074366

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 12.5 pt Galliard
by Ace Filmsetting Ltd, Frome, Somerset
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>

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PREFACE

The first thing to be said of the work presented here is that it has been compiled, in the main, from notes. The notes come from two sources: those handed out by Rush Rhees during the seminars he gave on *On Certainty* in the 1970 Lent and Summer Terms at the University College of Swansea, as it was then called, and the notes I took on those occasions. The sources of the other material I have included are given in footnotes. Apart from Rhees's letter to Norman Malcolm (chapter 15), I am responsible for the titles of the chapters. I am also responsible for the title of the book, and for the divisions in the text.

The second thing to be said of the present work is that in the unlikely event of Rhees ever having published any of his notes, I am sure that the work would have taken a very different form.

These two observations bring me to the form which the present work does take. If I am asked why the notes should be published at all, my answer is easy: I think Rhees is the most perceptive reader of Wittgenstein's work, the one who sees more deeply than anyone else, in my opinion, the *connections* between different aspects of Wittgenstein's work. Rhees saw such connections in philosophy generally. It was not for him a collection of loosely knit specialisms, but a continuous enquiry into human discourse which, for Rhees, as for Wittgenstein, meant addressing the central question: What does it mean to say something? Rhees's insistence on the continuity in the *problems* Wittgenstein addressed, from his earliest to his last work, is another instance of stressing these connections, and is one of the valuable aspects of the present work.

My opinion of the value of Rhees's observations did not, in itself, solve

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the problem of organizing the notes at my disposal. In this matter, I have benefited from the remarks of the anonymous readers of the two publishers to whom the work was submitted. As usual, with Rhees, reactions varied from the unimpressed and slightly indignant, to the warmly receptive. The effect on me was to think the former too severe, and the latter too kind, but, in different ways, I learned from them all. For example, from the bewildered reader who said: while it would indeed be a novel and original thesis to claim that *On Certainty* was a work in logic, and that here, too, Wittgenstein is concerned with what it means to say something, there is not the slightest indication that this is so, as shown by the absence of discussions of syntax and grammar – I was given a renewed determination to show that the claims about logic and discourse are well-founded in *On Certainty*. On the other hand, I realized, later, that I could not do this without a radical reorganizing of the text. More sympathetic readers, while complaining of some repetition in the text, simply requested that, in my introduction, I should relate Rhees's emphases more explicitly to other views of *On Certainty* propounded by contemporary philosophers. I have met their request by replacing my introduction with an afterword, in which I decided that the best service I could do for the reader would be to highlight the controversial issues, in reading *On Certainty*, where Rhees differs from some other readers. In this way, hopefully, readers will be helped to reflect on these differences for themselves and carry the discussion forward. Despite my preference, however, some readers may be helped by reading the afterword first.

The sympathetic readers were too kind, however, in not calling for a more radical revision of the text, and I now find it hard to believe that I thought the version I submitted to them was acceptable. So a word of explanation is necessary.

In my first attempt at organizing the notes, I simply divided the work into two parts consisting of Rhees's notes and my own. This not only created a considerable overlap in topics, but failed to establish sufficient textual continuity. I am grateful to an early anonymous reader for getting me to see this.

In my second attempt at organizing the notes, I concentrated on a fact that I still think is very important, namely, Rhees's insistence that Wittgenstein's interest in the issues discussed in *On Certainty* did not constitute for him a new topic, the product of discussions of G. E. Moore with Norman Malcolm in 1949. Rhees insists that the questions Wittgenstein discusses are different from Moore's interests, and go back as far as 1930. I thought it a good idea, therefore, given the care Rhees took to establish

this fact, to divide the work in a new way. The first half would discuss the philosophical background to *On Certainty*, namely, the discussions which lead, quite naturally, to the new issues discussed in it. The second half would then concentrate on discussions of *On Certainty* itself. Instead of keeping Rhees's notes separate from mine, I would now intersperse them in the new divisions, while still respecting the separate identity of each seminar. This was the form of my penultimate submission of the work. All that was needed, after that, I thought, was the revision of the introduction.

The question of repetition, however, continued to bother me. It was not unconnected, I believe, with my varying reactions to reading the newly constructed first half, liking it on some readings, and disliking it strongly on others. I could not help noticing that my dislike centred on my own notes, rather than those of Rhees. It took me some time to realize why. Unlike the handouts, which were self-contained and could be read at leisure, Rhees, in teaching, came back to the same points again and again from different angles. Hence the repetition in my notes. I saw that what was needed to present the background to *On Certainty* was to extract the different themes to which Rhees returned in his seminars. This is what I have tried to do in the first half of the present work. I have, therefore, made free use of my notes over the two terms, combining elements of seminars which contributed to a common theme. I hoped the result created the continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophical concerns that Rhees wanted to bring out. That result was finally improved by further useful suggestions from Blackwell's anonymous reader.

There is one piece of repetition which I have not attempted to rectify. This is the number of times it is said that Wittgenstein is concerned with what he called 'the peculiar role' played by certain empirical propositions in our discourse. I have left this unchanged simply because Rhees insists that, from first to last, this is the main theme of *On Certainty*.

I want to express my gratitude to some people other than the anonymous readers, before concluding this preface. My thanks to Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr are indicated in the text, but I am also grateful to the latter for help with proofreading the typescript. I am also grateful to Helen Baldwin, Secretary to the Department of Philosophy, for coping, with her usual efficiency, with my handwritten text in preparing the manuscript for publication.

I also want to express my gratitude to those publishers who have made it possible for me to present Rush Rhees's philosophical work to a wider audience. Two further works are under consideration at the moment: *In Dialogue with the Presocratics* and *Plato and Dialectic*. The first two works

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to be published were *On Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). A biographical sketch of Rhees appears in both works. These were followed by *Moral Questions* (Macmillan and St Martin's Press, 1999) and *Discussions of Simone Weil* (State University of New York Press, 1999).

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the A. E. Heath Memorial Fund at Swansea for the typing of the manuscript. It was also this fund, set up as the result of a generous gift by Mrs Heath and subscriptions by friends, in memory of A. E. Heath, Foundation Professor of Philosophy at Swansea (1925–52), which enabled the Department of Philosophy to purchase Rhees's papers after his death. The Rush Rhees Archive consists of 16,000 pages of manuscript of various kinds. Rhees, who published little during his lifetime, wrote for himself, friends and acquaintances, almost every day.

With respect to the present essay on *On Certainty*, I am deeply appreciative for the faith shown in the work by Jeff Dean of Blackwell. Over the six years I have worked on it, off and on, I think my own understanding of *On Certainty* has deepened. My hope is that, either through agreement or disagreement, this will also be the experience of readers of Rhees's discussions.

D. Z. Phillips
Swansea/Claremont

Part I

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND TO *ON* *CERTAINTY*

I

ON CERTAINTY: A NEW TOPIC?

In the last months of his life, Wittgenstein was interested in certain propositions which had been discussed by G. E. Moore. Wittgenstein's notes make up the work now called *On Certainty*. The title is not an altogether happy one. 'Certainty' is no more prominent a theme than 'knowledge', 'mistake' or 'what it is to say anything at all'.

The reference to Moore's propositions can give, and has given, readers the impression that Wittgenstein's work is devoted to a polemic against Moore's writings. This is a mistake. Wittgenstein quotes several propositions which Moore had selected and spoken about, returns to them repeatedly, as he does to other, additional, propositions, because he thinks they play a curious role in our speaking and thinking. An investigation of this role (and that is what the remarks from the beginning to the end of this book are) leads to a better understanding of human language, thought and language-games (and because of that, of science and logic, for example). Moore does not go into these questions. The propositions from Moore stand at the centre of Wittgenstein's investigations, but something different interests him. That aspect of the propositions which so impressed Wittgenstein, Moore did not notice or find very interesting. (Which is not surprising. The seeds bore fruit for Wittgenstein because they fell into the soil of his other thoughts and interests.)

Adapted, in the main, from a letter by Rhees to G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, dated 18 June 1969, commenting on an earlier draft of their preface to *On Certainty*, and from scattered notes in German by Rhees in the late 1960s from which Timothy Tessin extracted and translated relevant passages.

Wittgenstein quotes these propositions (a) from Moore's essay 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925); (b) from Moore's lecture 'Proof of the External World' (1939); and (c) from Norman Malcolm's accounts of philosophical discussions with Moore.

(a) Moore lists a series of propositions which he 'knows with certainty'. Such as: that a living body now exists 'which is *my* body'; that this body was born at a definite time in the past; that since his birth he was continuously on the Earth's surface or not far from the Earth's surface; that the Earth existed many years before his birth ... and still others.

(b) Moore says: 'I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another".'¹

(c) When Malcolm lived for a time with Moore, they used to sit in the garden and discuss philosophical questions. Moore would point to a tree repeatedly and say: 'I know that that is a tree'. Wittgenstein refers to this in *On Certainty*:

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 observes this, and I tell him: 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy.' (467)

Wittgenstein had conversations with Malcolm on a visit to the United States in 1949, including discussions of Moore's 'Defence of Common Sense' (see Malcolm's *Knowledge and Certainty*). A case may be made for saying that Malcolm aroused his interest and that *On Certainty* gives us what Wittgenstein wrote on this topic from that time until his death. This suggests that this is not the sort of discussion that Wittgenstein had had before; or that he had not written on, or discussed, these questions in these ways before. I think this is very misleading. And it may prevent people from recognizing the constant connections between these remarks and his earlier discussions. There are parallels going back at least to 1930, to the time when he began to be dissatisfied with the ways in which people spoke of 'logische Möglichkeit' and 'logisch unmöglich' (logical possibility and logical impossibility). These are examples, not just analogies.²

Wittgenstein used to speak of Moore's 'Defence of Common Sense' again and again, years before that visit to Malcolm. In one of his discussions in which he spoke of it, he said he had told Moore he thought this was his best article, and Moore had replied that he also thought it was. And he

used to speak of the queer character of Moore's 'obviously true' propositions.

I am not questioning the point that his 1949 discussions with Malcolm about Moore's 'defence of common sense' interested him, particularly at the period he was writing the notes in *On Certainty*. My point is rather that his 1949 conversations with Malcolm stimulated Wittgenstein to take up thoughts which were not new to him, and to develop them further. These thoughts were already present in some remarks in Wittgenstein's lectures in Cambridge in the Lent and Summer Terms of the session 1937–8.

Consider the following remarks in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*:

It is possible to imagine a case in which I *could* find out that I had two hands. Normally, however, I *cannot* do so. 'But all you need is to hold them up before your eyes!' – If I am *now* in doubt whether I have two hands, I need not believe my eyes either. (I might just as well ask a friend.)

With this is connected the fact that, for instance, the proposition 'The Earth has existed for millions of years' makes clearer sense than 'The Earth has existed in the last five minutes'. For I should ask anyone who asserted the latter: 'What observations does this proposition refer to; and what observations would count against it?' – whereas I know what ideas and observations the former proposition goes with.

I know, of course, that there is much more than this in *On Certainty*. But it is not a development which began in 1949.

[In their published preface to *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright write: 'Malcolm acted as a goad to his interest in Moore's "defence of common sense"', and the propositions he discussed there, but also that 'Wittgenstein had long been interested in these'. The following chapters show how that interest is connected with wider issues and wider developments in Wittgenstein's earlier and later thought.]³

2

SAYING AND DESCRIBING

Wittgenstein's earliest and last concern was: what does it mean to say something? For Wittgenstein, the earliest asking of this question took the form: what is a proposition? Plato in the *Sophist* speaks of conditions for the possibility of discourse. He was concerned with the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, between genuine discourse and sham discourse. Not showing *how* the distinction is to be made, but *that* there is one to make. There are dangers in this way of speaking. If you speak of 'conditions', of genuine and sham discourse, it may seem as though you could find some sort of measure or criterion by which what is really language can be distinguished from what is not, although it appears at first as if it were.

What is to rule out a sentence whose surface grammar is correct as nonsense? Unless you have a general criterion doesn't anything go? In his earlier work, as Wittgenstein characterized it later, he recognized that there is a great deal of ambiguity and imperfection in colloquial speech. He then searched for the 'pure article'. He was interested in the question of what makes language into language:

'But still, it isn't a game, if there is some vagueness *in the rules*'. – But *does* this prevent its being a game? – 'Perhaps you'll call it a game, but at any rate it certainly isn't a perfect game.' This means: it has impurities, and what I am interested in at present is the pure article. – But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we too should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word 'game' clearly. (*Investigations* I: 100)

So this is one of the dangers we may fall into in recognizing Plato's distinction between genuine and sham discourse. Sham discourse for Wittgenstein would include metaphysics – we seem to be asking or saying something when we are not.

In the *Tractatus* it seems as though he were trying to discover, by logical analysis, certain principles on which the intelligibility of language depends. He wanted to find the general form of the proposition. What is the difference between saying something and making a noise or a mark on paper? At the time of the *Tractatus* he thought that if it is 'saying something', it must have something in common with all other cases of saying something. If you admit ambiguity, all seems lost. We don't have to learn sentences. If we understand words and syntax then we understand the sentence. That assumes that words in their syntax do say something.

Wittgenstein argued in the *Tractatus* that there are elementary propositions and that we can show their relation to each other. In all this there does seem to be an attempt to show what the intelligibility of what is said depends on.

One of the curious things about the *Tractatus* was that he wanted to say that certain combinations of symbols not only *didn't* have sense, but *couldn't* have sense. This was a position which he gave up later. From the early 1930s on he didn't try to discover something in the way words in a proposition are put together, which would show how they could have sense or not. In the *Tractatus* he said that certain propositions haven't any meaning because we haven't given them any, but there were some propositions which couldn't have meaning.

At one stage, fairly soon after the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein held that if a proposition is a genuine proposition its meaning can be brought out by logical analysis. The use of analysis differed from the *Tractatus* period. He thought of it as showing the relation between any proposition and the sense-data in terms of which the meaning of any proposition can in some way be analysed. Certain data are heard, felt, seen, etc., and the possibility of analysing more complex expressions, and the possibility of there being meaning in them, depends on showing their relation to those immediately experienced data.¹ The Logical Positivists said that the meaning of a proposition is its method of verification.

The idea was that 'the given', say, a red patch, is simply seen. We don't have to ask what it means. The whole analysis ends with what is seen, as though the notion of 'seeing' were itself simply given, and not open to further analysis. This is what Wittgenstein is countering in the later discussions in the *Investigations*. Compare what he says about related concepts – seeing, experiencing, etc.

Wittgenstein wants to reject this way of speaking, the view that there must be primary data on which all else depends (Russell's ultimate furniture of the world, Quine's ontology – 'what there is'); that on which the possibility of discourse depends.

If the idea of 'seeing' is not as unitary or simple as analysis in terms of sense-data suggests – if the concept of seeing itself stands in need of conceptual analysis – it does not have the unquestioned character that seems to qualify it as the basis for all analysis.

But the matter goes further. A long time before writing Part Two of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein had begun to question the assumption that there must be one way to distinguish language from what is not language. The notion of 'saying something' is not a single notion, but a family of notions, and the same is true of language itself. The question 'What makes language possible?' hasn't much meaning for Wittgenstein.

If one says that language doesn't always mean the same thing, it isn't simply that there are different styles and different grammars – that French is more idiomatic than German – but that *what you mean by speaking of it as language is different in the one case from the others*. This is what Wittgenstein is trying to work through by his conceptual analysis and his ideas of games and families.

In the notes he was writing for the 1930 'Preface', he says of the *Tractatus* (he does not use that title) that it gave too much the appearance of a scientific work, suggesting that it was making or stating *discoveries*. He said this went with a false view of logical analysis he had held at the time.

In my earlier book the solution of the problems is not presented in a sufficiently common-or-garden way; it makes it seem as though discoveries were needed in order to solve our problems; and not enough has been done to bring everything into the form of the grammatically obvious in ordinary ways of speaking. Everything gives too much the appearance of discoveries.

He made other remarks on these lines again and again. He thought it very important; he was constantly revising what he had written in this sense; and he knew (and said) that the greatest difficulty was to state everything in common-or-garden language (the Austrian 'hausbacken' is literally, 'home-baked') and *at the same time* to achieve and preserve exactitude, and avoid woolliness. Russell, for instance, could not see that Wittgenstein *was* preserving exactitude, or even that he was trying to. So he said that in later life Wittgenstein grew tired of hard thinking and invented a method to make it unnecessary. Although Wittgenstein sent Russell a copy of the *Blue Book*, I

doubt if Russell ever read more than the first few pages, if that.

People like Quine, for instance – whom Russell admires – think that the use of special terms and symbolism is indispensable in philosophy, and that it ‘yields new insights’ which could not be reached if we just kept to ordinary home-baked expressions. Wittgenstein’s opposition to this sort of view is not just an aesthetic one. It goes with his whole investigation of, and discussion of, the difference between sense and nonsense; of meaning, of insight, of the relation of thought and reality. He went into these questions more deeply and more persistently than Russell ever did, and, I suspect, Quine.

Discussing questions in a ‘common-or-garden’ way is connected with the ‘revolution’ in the way of discussing philosophical problems which Wittgenstein was introducing. The phrase ‘revolution in philosophy’ (not Wittgenstein’s, I think) is likely to be misleading too. For Wittgenstein used to say and repeat that he was discussing the same problems that Plato discussed. We cannot say: ‘It is a pity that Wittgenstein could not have presented his ideas in something more nearly the accepted philosophical style, more in the style of Ayer or Quine.’ *That would not have been a presentation of his philosophical views.* The point is partly that he was bringing out – from many angles, coming back to the question again and again – the connection of these questions: the questions Plato was discussing, with our understanding and thinking altogether. And I would add: with our *lives* altogether. Cf: ‘to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life’ – and, more important, *Investigations* II: xii, p. 230. If Russell and others want to talk of ‘the *cult*’ of ordinary language – well, so it seems to them, I suppose. But Wittgenstein had *very* deep reasons for what he was doing.²

By *On Certainty* Wittgenstein is pretty far from any attempt to show what the intelligibility of what is said depends on. He has given up the idea of a general form of the proposition, or of a general structure of language. If we ask what it is to say something, or how a set of sounds is distinct from gibberish, no single answer is given, unless we take as a single answer that it must play a part in a language-game. This latter expression is far vaguer than the expression ‘general form of the proposition’. It may be determinate enough in certain cases: a meeting to clinch a business deal is very different from a meeting of people to relate the latest gossip. So what we call a language-game is extremely varied. The notion of a language-game is not closed. No definite limit about what you would count in it. So if you do take the above as a single answer, it does not tell you how to fit it to any particular case so far.

Language-games *are* different. Hagglng over prices in the market-place,