

Connections and Divisions in *On Certainty*

Kim van Gennip, Groningen

I

The central claim of this paper is that *On Certainty* (1969) is not to be seen as a “work” of Wittgenstein, but as an assemblage from the enormous collection of material that constitutes the *Nachlass* (cf. Stern 1996; Ackermann 1998; Hintikka 1991). To substantiate this assertion, I will critically compare the publication to its sources, namely manuscripts 172, 174, 175, 176 and 177 of the *Nachlass*. I will trace and value the decisions G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright have made in gathering this collection. Their claim is twofold: first, Wittgenstein “marked it [*On Certainty*] off in his notebooks as a separate topic”, and second “it constitutes a single sustained treatment of the topic” (Wittgenstein 1969, Preface). I will show that the first claim is incorrect: not only are Wittgenstein’s “marks” ambiguous, but the editors applied their own demarcations in these notebooks as well. Their second claim is in need of amplification. Wittgenstein’s concern with epistemological issues is not limited to these five manuscripts: other notebooks of the same period also contain entries that strongly relate to topics discussed in *On Certainty*. I will discuss examples from the undated notebooks MSS 169, 170 and 171, published in *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. II: The “Inner” and the “Outer”* (1992). These show that it is difficult to make strict divisions in the *Nachlass* in general, and in the late writings of the years 1949-1951 in particular. In addition, I will diverge from two editorial claims regarding the nature and dating of these three manuscripts and I propose an alternative one.

I believe that we may benefit from tracing and assessing the editorial choices in two ways. First, hitherto neglected connections between different manuscripts and themes will come to focus. Wittgenstein’s mapping of epistemological concepts for example turns out to be strongly allied to his analysis of the relation between mental states and bodily behavior. Second, a search for such connections at the same time forces us to pay attention to the historical development of Wittgenstein’s thoughts. Wittgenstein has written on the same topic at different periods of time, and the significance of remarks is completely different due to different contexts in which these remarks appear.

II

On Certainty derives from four different notebooks and a bundle of loose sheets. The source of the first section (§§ 1-65) is MS 172, a manuscript of 24 loose pages. The last five pages are printed as part II of *Remarks on Color* (1977). A remark on belief in miracles, originally placed between § 64 and § 65 of *On Certainty*, has not appeared in print. The whole manuscript is undated: Anscombe assumes that Wittgenstein wrote these remarks between December 1949 and March 1950.

Strikingly, Wittgenstein does not clearly separate the section “on certainty” from the section “on colors”: § 65 at page 20 in the original manuscript is followed by one other remark, and Wittgenstein hereafter immediately continues – without drawing any line – with remarks on Goethe’s phenomenological analysis of colors. Moreover, at the end of the *On Certainty* section Wittgenstein draws lines between every single remark, that is, between §§ 60-66. I

believe these subsequent lines indicate that Wittgenstein does not draw lines merely to mark a change of topic. Possibly the lines between §§ 60-66 signify the importance Wittgenstein attached to each of these remarks, yet it is equally probable that they have no particular purpose at all. The editors’ grouping of remarks based on such lines seems therefore arbitrary. It may seem trivial to talk about lines that Wittgenstein did or did not draw. However, such observations do reveal to what extent the grouping of remarks is based on editorial decisions – and not so much on Wittgenstein’s own clustering or separation of notes.

§§ 66-192 of *On Certainty* derive from a notebook of 40 pages (MS 174), a manuscript that contains only one date at page 2r, namely April 24th 1950. At page 14v Wittgenstein draws a line; with the exception of a few remarks – printed in *Culture and Value* (1980) –, the notes preceding this line are published in *Last Writings Vol. II*, and the subsequent notes are printed as the second section of *On Certainty*.

A large notebook of 79 pages (MS 175) is the source of the whole third section of *On Certainty* (§§ 193-425). This manuscript contains several dates, the first at page 33r – September 23rd 1950 – and the last – March 21st 1951 – at page 74v. The editors omitted one remark, written at March 10th.

The first cluster of remarks in MS 176 is undated and printed as Part I of *Remarks on Color*. At page 22r we find the date March 21st 1951. After this date follow remarks 426-523 of *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein draws no line between these sections. Subsequently, at page 46v, Wittgenstein does draw a line, and the eleven pages that follow are printed in LW, Vol. II. Then, at page 51v of MS 176, we find § 524 of *On Certainty*, and the notebook continues up to § 637 of the published work. The last date is April 24th 1951. Considering the amount of text it is unlikely that Wittgenstein wrote the last nine pages of MS 175 and the first 22 of MS 176 all on March 21st; it is possible that Wittgenstein wrote the first section in a completely different period. Possibly this gap in chronology motivated the editors to publish both parts in different editions, yet Wittgenstein does not segregate these two sections.

The last section of *On Certainty* (§§ 638-676) is written in a small notebook (MS 177), the first remarks of which are dated April 25th 1951. The last remarks, dated April 27th 1951, are written two days before Wittgenstein’s death.

The above survey of the content of these five notebooks shows that *On Certainty* is a rather diffuse editorial compilation of notes that derive from five different manuscripts written over a period of approximately 17 months. Surely the choices of the editors are not unreasonable or illogical. However, Wittgenstein did not unmistakably mark off these sections in his notebooks. In MS 172 Wittgenstein draws several lines the purpose of which is far from clear. The presumed function of such lines as marks of demarcation is therefore doubtful. Furthermore, in manuscripts 172 and 176 the editors applied their own, alternately thematically or chronologically orientated, demarcation marks. The preface to *On Certainty* does not mention editorial decisions such as

these: Anscombe and von Wright suggest that Wittgenstein conceived of these four sections as a separate piece of work. This claim is, I believe, incorrect.

III

I will qualify the second claim regarding *On Certainty* - that it constitutes a single sustained treatment of the topic -, indirectly, by first discussing the editorial claims that are made regarding three undated manuscripts - MSS 169, 170 & 171 -, which are published in *Last Writings Vol. II*. In their preface to this edition, G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman assert that MS 169 "was probably already begun in late fall, 1948, or in the spring of 1949". They also claim that this notebook is of the nature of preliminary studies for MSS 137-138. Wittgenstein composed these two manuscripts between 2 February 1949 and 20 May 1949. The second half of 137 and the entirety of 138 are published as *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I* (1982). The small notebooks MS 170 and MS 171 - 19 pages in all - are, according to von Wright and Nyman, chronologically probably closely connected to MS 169 and possibly written in 1949.

In my view, both claims regarding MS 169 are incorrect: I believe that MS 169 is written not sooner than the summer of 1949. This implies that MS 169 cannot be regarded as preliminary studies for MSS 137 & 138, manuscripts that Wittgenstein wrote earlier. The claim regarding MSS 170 & 171 needs qualification: in my view these manuscripts are, like MS 169, written in the summer of 1949, or shortly after.

Evidence for this position lies in the relation between a series of conversations that Wittgenstein held with Norman Malcolm in the summer of 1949, and the content of all three manuscripts. Wittgenstein set sail to America in July 1949, and he stayed with Malcolm for nearly three months. Malcolm gives an account of their conversations in his *Memoir* (1958). At the time Wittgenstein visited him, Malcolm had just written an article (Malcolm 1949) in which he criticizes G.E. Moore's ideas as formulated in "Defence of Common Sense" (1925) and "Proof of an External World" (1939). Malcolm's criticism was the main subject of discussion.

A first theme discussed by both philosophers is Moore's use of "I know" in for example his statement "I know that here is one hand, and here is another" (Moore 1959, 146). Moore is misusing language, says Malcolm. His use of "I know" is contrary to the ordinary and correct use of this expression. Wittgenstein is less forthright about the idea that Moore misuses language. Rather than declaring that it is a misuse of language to say "I know that this is a hand", Wittgenstein prefers to say that it has no clear meaning, "and that Moore himself doesn't know how he is using it" (Malcolm 1958, 89).

Notes in MS 171 concern the same topic. On Moore's use of "I know" Wittgenstein remarks: "Wenn Moore es gebraucht, so ist es, als wollte er sagen: 'Die Philosophen sagen immer, man könnte das Gefühl des Wissens nur in dem und dem Fall haben, ich aber habe es auch in diesem und diesem und diesem Fall'. Er schaut auf die Hand, gibt sich das Gefühl des Wissens und sagt nun, er habe es" (MS 171, 9-10).

In this manuscript Wittgenstein further comments upon another example that he elaborately discussed with Malcolm. It concerns the use of "I know" in an expression such as "I know that this is a tree". The case derives from a discussion between Malcolm and Moore: while sitting in

the garden of Moore's house, Moore would give an example of something he knows for certain, and he "would point at a tree a few feet away, and say, with peculiar emphasis, 'I know that *that's* a tree'. He would then claim that he had just made an assertion that was perfectly meaningful (as well as true)" (Malcolm 1976, 173). Wittgenstein writes: "Es ist wahr, daß [Moore] weiß, daß dies ein Baum ist, dies zeigt sich in seinem ganzen Benehmen. Daraus folgt nicht, daß er beim Philosophieren die Worte 'Ich weiß [...] etc.]' nicht mißversteht" (MS 171, 12). Wittgenstein subscribes to Malcolm's idea that Moore's peculiar emphasis upon 'I know that that's a tree' will not refute a skeptical philosopher who denies that we can ever know with certainty the truth of an empirical proposition like "This is a tree" or "The house is on fire". Moore, says Wittgenstein, wants to exhibit knowing for certain to himself, i.e. he wants to produce in himself the feeling of knowledge, which is to counter the skeptic's claim that we can never have absolute certain knowledge. However, says Wittgenstein, this "feeling of knowing" is irrelevant, since we are not dealing with a psychological but a logical issue. And this means that we have to show the septic "that there is a point at which there is neither any 'making more certain' nor any 'turning out to be false'" (Malcolm 1958, 91). Note that Wittgenstein draws several lines in this manuscript. The editors have chosen not to interpret them as lines of demarcation this time.

At the end of MS 169 Wittgenstein expresses the absurdity of Moore's expression "I know that this is a tree" as follows: "I know that this is the earth" - saying which I stamp my foot on the ground" (Wittgenstein 1992, 46). The irony is obvious. This section of the manuscript contains several remarks on the use of "I know". As Malcolm recalls, according to Wittgenstein there is an ordinary use of "I know" when there is not any making sure. For example, a blind man might ask "Are you sure that it is a tree?" A sighted person could reply "I know it is a tree". This, says Wittgenstein, would be a case of certainty "in the highest degree" (Malcolm 1958, 89-90): I should be willing to count nothing as evidence that there is not a tree there.

The same point is expressed in MS 169. If someone reports a well-known fact to us, e.g. that that is the Schneeberg, we may say "I know that it is the Schneeberg", meaning that it is not subject to any doubt at all" (Wittgenstein 1992, 45). This is an example of the use of "I know" "in which that expression really functions 'im sprachlichen verkehr'" (Malcolm 1958, 90). Yet Moore, says Wittgenstein, does not give such examples: "Moore's sentence was a practical one left indeterminate" (Wittgenstein 1992, 44).

Next to Moore's use of the expression "I know", Malcolm and Wittgenstein talk about the meaning of Moorean truisms such as "There exists at present a living human body, which is my body"; "The earth existed for a long time before my birth"; "My body has never been far from the surface of the earth"; "I am a human being" (Moore 1959, 33-34). Wittgenstein finds it difficult to think of a usage for "I know that the earth has existed for many years", and remarks that if we cannot think of a use for the sentence, "then we do not understand it at all" (Malcolm 1958, 90). MS 170 contains the earliest entries that are related to Moore's truism on the existence of the earth. If someone would ask us whether the earth really had existed before our birth, our response, says Wittgenstein, will be "of course it had". A doubt here "ist unmöglich" (MS 170, 5r). He adds that we would be slightly annoyed and timid, since we would be conscious of the fact that "wir einerseits gar nicht im Stande sind Gründe dafür anzugeben, weil es

scheinbar zu viele dafür gibt, und andererseits, daß ein Zweifel unmöglich ist, und man dem Fragenden gar nicht durch eine besondere Belehrung antworten kann sondern indem man ihm nach und nach ein Bild unserer Welt beibringt" (MS 170, 5). Again, Wittgenstein draws a line in this manuscript that the editors ignore.

IV

The similarities between the content of the three undated notebooks MSS 169, 179 & 171 and Malcolm's *Memoir*, lend plausibility to the view that Wittgenstein wrote MSS 170 & 171, and at least the latter part of MS 169, during or shortly after his stay in America. This means that their dating should be adjusted: in contrast to editorial suggestions, these manuscripts are not written at the end of 1948 or at the beginning of 1949, but in the summer of 1949 or shortly after. Consequently, MS 169 cannot be regarded as preliminary studies for MSS 137-138.

There is additional evidence for this last proposal (cf. Pichler 1994, 138-139). The beginning of MS 169 has the character of a summary: Wittgenstein omits the greater part of a remark and replaces it with a line. The complete remark comes from MS 137, MS 138, MS 144 or TS 234 – sometimes a remark is found in two or three of these items. Wittgenstein apparently extracted remarks from these four manuscripts for MS 169. Consequently, the view that MS 169 is preliminary to MSS 137-138 loses its plausibility. It is commonly held that Wittgenstein prepared TS 234 – printed as Part II of the *Investigations* – in June or July 1949, before he went to America, and that MS 144, the source for this typescript, is composed earlier that same year. It is more than likely, then, that MS 169 was written later than MS 144 or TS 234.

In his *Nachlass* studies, M. Nedo surmises that Wittgenstein wrote and dictated MS 169, MS 144 and TS 234 in the fall of 1949 (Nedo 1993, 46). There is too many evidence to the contrary: in a letter to Malcolm of 18 February 1949 Wittgenstein writes that he intends to "dictate the stuff that I have been writing since last autumn" (Malcolm 1958, 81). This intention is repeated in a letter written at 4 June. Anscombe recalls that Wittgenstein dictated TS 234 at the end of June or beginning of July 1949, while Wittgenstein stayed at von Wright's house in Cambridge (von Wright 1992, 185-186). Monk expresses the same view (Monk 1990, 542-544). Surprisingly, there are reasons to assume that Wittgenstein did not bring TS 234 with him when traveling to America. In an earlier letter to Malcolm, Wittgenstein expresses his intention to send Malcolm a copy of his work. This Wittgenstein did not do, yet, as Malcolm recalls, Wittgenstein had with him a copy of the writings he referred to in his letter, material that is "incorporated in Part II of the *Investigations*" (Malcolm 1958, 81). It is likely that Wittgenstein brought a copy of MS 144: according to Rush Rhees there existed a second copy of MS 144, in addition to the top copy. This second copy has been lost in the meantime (von Wright 1992, 182). Possibly Wittgenstein did not discuss TS 234 with Malcolm, but rather MS 144. This may seem a bit odd considering the fact that Wittgenstein had already shifted and rearranged this material. However, it must remain an assumption that it was a copy of this manuscript that Wittgenstein had with him.

Of what importance are the previous observations for *On Certainty*? The examples in MSS 169, 170 & 171 show, I believe, that Wittgenstein's concern with epistemological concepts is not limited to MSS 172, 174, 175, 176 and 177: other manuscripts of the same period contain notes on related issues. Moreover, there are several earlier manuscripts that contain reflections on the same topics, like MS 137, MS 138 and, most importantly, MS 119, a manuscript written in 1937, partly published as "On Cause and Effect" (1976). Clearly, the *Nachlass* contains numerous – scattered – sections on epistemology: apparently Wittgenstein felt the need to write on the topic in many different contexts, which points out that these issues may be of more importance to Wittgenstein's philosophy than is often assumed. Studying these remarks enables us to trace the development of Wittgenstein's thoughts on these matters. In turn, such an overview points to connections that exist between Wittgenstein's thoughts on epistemology and his reflections on the philosophy of psychology. This, however, is a matter of future research.

Literature

- Ackermann, R.J. 1988 *Wittgenstein's City*, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hintikka, J. 1991 "An Impatient Man and his Papers", *Synthese* 87, 183-202.
- Malcolm, N. 1949 "Defending Common Sense", *Philosophical Review* 58, 201-220.
- Malcolm, N. 1958 *Memoir*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Malcolm, N. 1976 "Moore and Wittgenstein on the Sense of 'I know'", in N. Malcolm, *Thought and Knowledge*, London: Cornell University Press, 170-198.
- Monk, R. 1990 *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, New York: Free Press.
- Nedo, M. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Wiener Ausgabe. Einführung/ introduction*. Wien, New York: Springer.
- Pichler, A. 1994 *Untersuchungen zu Wittgensteins Nachlass*, Bergen: The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen.
- Stern, D.G. 1996 "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy", in H. Sluga and D.G. Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge: Needham Heights, 442-476.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1969 *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1992 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology Vol. II: The "Inner" and the "Outer" 1949-1951*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1982 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology Vol. I*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 2000 *Wittgenstein's Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1993 "On Cause and Effect", in J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.), *Philosophical Occasions*, Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 368-422.
- Wright, G.H. von 1982 *Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Blackwell.