Moore *and* Wittgenstein *on* Certainty

Avrum Stroll

Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty

This page intentionally left blank

Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty

AVRUM STROLL

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1994

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland Madrid

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stroll, Avrum, 1921–
Moore and Wittgenstein on certainty / Avrum Stroll.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-508488-8
1. Moore, G. E. (George Edward), 1873–1958. 2. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1889–1951. Über Gewissheit. 3. Certainty. 4. Skepticism. I. Title
B1647.M74S86 1994 121'.63—dc20 93-22633

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Mary

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

There is an unforgettable entry in *On Certainty*—it is just one of many—where Wittgenstein writes: "Light dawns gradually over the whole." I should like to take this passage out of its original context and apply it to myself. The passage implies, of course, that before there was a shimmer of light there was darkness. These are, in fact, good descriptions of the process I went through in writing this book. Wittgenstein, as all exegetes know, is a notoriously obscure writer, and *On Certainty* is especially difficult to understand. It consists of a set of notes composed in the last eighteen months of his life and is unfinished, unpolished, and kaleidoscopic. When I first studied it the outcome was darkness, and even after a couple of readings there was only a glimmer of illumination. But light gradually dawned over the whole, and by time I had rewritten the manuscript five or six times I felt that I had some inkling of what Wittgenstein was up to. Whether that impression is well-founded readers will have to judge for themselves.

I was greatly assisted in this process of progressive enlightenment by a large number of persons. It would be impossible to describe the nature of their observations and suggestions in this limited space. Let me just say that I found them invaluable. I therefore wish to thank Henry Alexander, Georgios Anagnostopoulos, Marco Borioni, Paulo Dau, Guido Frongia, Christopher Latiolais, Marianne McDonald, A.P. Martinich, Robert Nozick and Barry Smith. To these names let me add that of my wife, Mary, who took time away from her own research on medieval papal politics to read each draft of the manuscript. Her acute and constructive recommendations greatly improved the style and organization of the work. This book was mainly written during three lengthy stays at the American Academy in Rome in the period 1989–1992. Without the hospitality and generosity of the then director, Dr. Joseph Connors, and his wife, Françoise, and of the assistant director, Pina Pasquantonio, it would have taken me much longer to complete this study.

I also wish to thank Timothy Moore, who owns the copyright to his father's *Philosophical Papers*, for permission to quote from that work and Basil Blackwell for permission to quote from their edition of *On Certainty*, which was translated from the German by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe.

La Jolla, California A.S.
October 1993

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty

Isn't the question this: "What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?" And to that the answer seems to me to be: "You don't have to change it. That is just what their being 'fundamental' is." (*O.C.*, 512)

1

Why Moore and Wittgenstein?

This book is almost entirely about Moore and Wittgenstein, and its concentration is on a spectrum of topics that they explored in the latter stages of their careers: whether there is a common sense view of the world and if so what it is; whether the propositions comprising such a view are known to be true, and known to be true with certainty; whether the common sense view is a specimen of folk thought—folk psychology, folk physics, and folk semantics—and accordingly whether it will and should be replaced by a world picture deriving from scientific inquiry. Each of these topics splinters into an array of others—when it is true and/or appropriate to say one knows, when doubting has or fails to have a point, what counts as a proof, and when the adducing of evidence is apposite—so that the range we shall ultimately be dealing with covers most of the classical subject matter of epistemology and some aspects of metaphysics.

The question may well be asked: Why Moore and Wittgenstein as the foci of this study? With Wittgenstein especially, a positive response, half answering the question, is fairly obvious. There is a second positive response to the other half that is less so. Obviously, Wittgenstein is one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, perhaps the greatest; indeed, a reasonable case can be made for the claim that he may be the greatest philosopher since Kant. Of himself he said that his most important contribution was to have introduced a new method into philosophy, and as we shall see, there is considerable merit, as well as self-insight, in this remark. But in addition, his substantive contributions to the theory of meaning, the philosophy of mind, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophies of psychology and mathematics have been enormously influential, though in each of these cases the results he achieved can hardly be disassociated from the method itself.

But that, as is well known, is one of the features of philosophy: that its greatest advances, or at least changes in perspective, are often functions of new procedures. From Plato through Descartes and Spinoza to the present this has been the case. In the twentieth century, we can associate such changes, for instance, with the approaches that derive from developments in mathematical and symbolic logic: The achievements of Frege, Russell, and Quine are examples of how

a new methodology can transform an ancient subject. With J.L. Austin and the intensive concentration upon ordinary language another breakthrough was achieved whose results in such papers as "A Plea for Excuses" and "Three Ways of Spilling Ink" arise from the unique techniques that Austin employed.

What often makes for dispute in philosophy and for differences in the estimation of philosophers by other philosophers are differences in judgments about the merits of the methodology being invoked. So there is, as one might well expect, dispute about Wittgenstein's place in the pantheon of philosophical gods. Wittgenstein never expatiated on what that method was: he seemed to imply that others would pick it up in the course of reading his works. In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* he says that he felt his thoughts would be crippled if he tried to force them in any single direction against their natural inclination. So the method is displayed by strings of aphoristic remarks, a technique that, as he writes, "is connected with the very nature of the investigation." These remarks, often jumping from one topic to another, he characterizes as "sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings." We shall have more to say about his method in the chapters that follow. But whatever history's ultimate judgment about Wittgenstein and the style of doing philosophy that he introduced, there is no doubt that he was an original and profound investigator whose way of exploring philosophical problems has no exact precedent.

Unlike some disciplines in which it is the answers that count, in philosophy genius is often measured by the questions that are asked. By that measure Wittgenstein has no equal. He posed a host of queries that no one had asked before and that no one might ever have asked had he not lived. "If you are whistling a tune and you are interrupted, how do you know how to go on?" "Why is the alphabet like a string of pearls in a box?" "Does my telephone call to New York strengthen my conviction that the earth exists?" "Why would it be *unthinkable* that I should stay in the saddle however much the facts bucked?" "Are we to say that the knowledge that there are physical objects comes very early or very late?" And he was unbelievably productive. Of what are estimated to be some ninety volumes of materials in the Wittgenstein *nachlass*, only a dozen or so have now been edited and published. Some of the manuscripts in the collection are, to be sure, variants of others, and some are composed of non-philosophical correspondence, but the quantity of the purely philosophical material is staggering.

Ironically enough, during Wittgenstein's lifetime only two authorized works were published, the *Tractatus* and a short paper on logical form in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. The full impact of all that he wrote has thus yet to be felt. If one adds to his philosophical power an unusual personality and life style, we encounter a certain kind of mystique that no other philosopher of our time has possessed. In terms of the effect he had on those around him the closest analogue is possibly Socrates. Norman Malcolm's *Memoir* heightens the analogy; it depicts a philosophical personality who might well have been the protagonist of the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*. We can thus easily see why one would choose to write about him.

The second positive response is less obvious. Since Wittgenstein's death in 1951 there has been a vast outpouring of articles, monographs, collections of essays, some biographies, and even some novels, devoted to his work and his life. In the past decade the flow has become a torrent. In 1987, for example, there appeared a fifteen-volume collection, edited by John V. Canfield, consisting of more than 250 previously published articles about Wittgenstein. Three of these volumes deal with the *Tractatus*, and the others with his later work after his return to Cambridge in 1929, with the *Blue and Brown Books*, the *Investigations*, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and so forth.

Furthermore, since the middle 1980s the literature devoted to Wittgenstein's philosophy has been augmented by new books by Cora Diamond, Rudolph Haller, G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, Gertrude Conway, Marie McGinn, Ronald Suter, S. Stephen Hilmy, Fergus Kerr, Norman Malcolm, Jaako and Merrill B. Hintikka, Jonathan Westphal, Oswald Hanfling, Colin McGinn, David Pears, E. von Savigny, and Anthony Kenny, to mention only a few. One can add to the burgeoning corpus three biographies (a new edition of W.W. Bartley's controversial *Wittgenstein;* Volume I of a projected three-volume biography by Brian McGuinness dealing with the period up to 1921; and a one-volume, synoptic biography by Ray Monk, published in 1990) and even a (somewhat scurrilous) novel, *The World As I Found It* by Bruce Duffy in which Wittgenstein is the main character.

So this plethora of recent studies, added to an earlier torrent of scholarly materials, makes it sensible to ask: Why propose to do another book on Wittgenstein? To this question, as I have said, the answer though positive is not obvious. But it is simple. In the Wittgensteinian materials that have been published to date, two of his works are generally regarded as masterpieces, standing out from the others: the superlative contribution of Wittgenstein's early period, the *Tractatus*, and the even greater achievement of his maturity, the *Philosophical Investigations*. But a consensus is growing among exegetes that a third work must be added to this pair, namely, *On Certainty*. Yet this work has not received the intensive scholarly treatment it deserves.

Some of the books I have referred to above, for example, Oswald Hanfling's excellent *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*, devote some space to *On Certainty* (a whole chapter in Hanfling's case), but in general their focus is elsewhere. More important, they tend to interpret *On Certainty* in the light of Wittgenstein's approach in the *Investigations*, thus minimizing the originality of the later work. Moreover, when contrasted with the flood of treatises on the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* the studies devoted to *On Certainty* are surprisingly few, though growing in number. These fall into two groups, separated by nearly a decade of silence. There were five books in what might be called an extended first phase, or those published between 1971 and 1981: *Intentionality and Knowledge: Studies in the Philosophy of G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein* by Helge Malgren, 1971; *Certainty: A Discussion of Wittgenstein's Notes in On Certainty* by Carolyn Wilde, 1976; *Paradoxes of Knowledge* by Elizabeth Wolgast, 1977; *Wittgenstein and Knowledge* by Thomas Morawetz, 1978; and *On Doubting the Reality of Reality:*

Moore and Wittgenstein on Sceptical Doubts by Gunnar Svensson, 1981. This brief, concentrated flurry stopped suddenly, and no books on the Wittgenstein opus appeared until 1989 when *Sense and Certainty* by Marie McGinn and *Wittgenstein On Foundations* by Gertrude Conway emerged.

These are both interesting contributions that attempt to grapple in new ways with some of the fundamental themes of *On Certainty*. Conway, rightly in my opinion, sees Wittgenstein as offering a new type of foundationalism, rejecting the sort of categorization of Wittgenstein as an anti-foundationalist that has received its most explicit formulation in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty (1979). She appeals to many passages in *On Certainty* in support of her view, but much of the evidence derives from Wittgenstein's other writings. In effect, then, her scope is the whole Wittgensteinian corpus, beginning with the *Tractatus*. The work is thus not a study of *On Certainty* per se.

In contrast, Marie McGinn's book has exactly this concentration. McGinn argues that unlike Moore, Austin, Stroud, and Cavell, it is Wittgenstein who has provided a philosophically satisfactory rebuttal of scepticism. This essay sees deeply into the nature of scepticism and into Wittgenstein's treatment of it. Her thesis that Wittgenstein has shown why no justification that the external world exists is needed is a persuasive one and on the right track. But McGinn's approach has serious shortcomings as well, which I shall mention in a moment.

So, to date (1993), we have seen only a handful of books dedicated to *On Certainty*. To this literature we can add a small number of articles, most of them written in the past few years, whose focus is *Uber Gewissheit*. I should add, of course, that there is a staggering number of papers dealing with the relationship between Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty* and such topics as religion, psychology, and culture; but in most of these the concentration is not upon *On Certainty* itself. Much of this literature either assumes that Wittgenstein's views are obvious and thus gives a superficial treatment of very subtle material, or simply misrepresents Wittgenstein in the course of arguing some theses of special interest to the authors, many of whom are not philosophers.

Without discussing in detail the seven specifically philosophical books I have mentioned it is difficult to make a convincing case that there is more, and indeed more of importance, to be said about *On Certainty* than we can find in the existing, specialized literature. But at least two general points can be made now in support of this judgment. First, only a handful of these materials deals with the relationship between Moore and Wittgenstein, and with the exception of Svensson's and McGinn's studies, none of them explores it *in extenso*. But even Svensson's understanding of Moore is flawed, so that the power and depth that Wittgenstein felt in Moore's treatment of the topic of certainty is not fully communicated. In most of the other writers Moore turns out to be merely a stalking horse for Wittgenstein, or the author's emphasis is upon the differing treatments of the phrase "I know" *as this appears in propositional contexts*. McGinn's monograph is marred by both of these features. In a book of eight chapters, three are devoted to "I know," an emphasis that illustrates her belief that Wittgenstein is offering a different analysis of the status of the propositions she calls "Moore-type propositions."

What McGinn fails to see is that as *On Certainty* progresses, Wittgenstein is steadily moving away from thinking of certainty in propositional terms at all. In contrast, he is better understood as driving a wedge between the concepts of knowledge and certainty, as "arguing" in his peculiar aphoristic way that these play different roles in human intercourse. One might say that for him propositions evincing knowledge claims *belong to* the language game, whereas certainty *grounds* the language game and is a condition of its possibility. What "stands fast for us" are not propositions but deeper sorts of commitments, both to nonhuman reality and to the human community. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language game.
>
> If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false. (*O.C.*, 204, 205)

Wittgenstein italicizes both "seeing" and "acting" in the first passage. He does so in order to delineate certain seminal differences between the concepts of knowledge and certainty: the former is tied to proposition making and has its turf within the language game, whereas the latter is connected with action and underlies the language game. One of his constant themes, mainly a negative refrain, is that Moore conflates these notions. But the main burden of his book is to give a positive characterization of certainty that radically disassociates it from knowing, that makes it "something animal as it were" (*O.C.*, 359).

To depict Wittgenstein's discussion of "I know" as if it were limited to the propositional making uses of language is to miss the originality of his approach, which lies in the powerful alternative to any propositionally oriented way of thinking about certainty. That alternative becomes, as the book proceeds, the basis for a new diagnosis of what is wrong with scepticism and a new prescription for neutralizing it. McGinn's interpretation remains fixed at the propositional level and does not carry us to this deeper dimension. My discussion attempts to provide this shift in perspective.

The second general point is that most of the earlier literature I have referred to has the character of reworked doctoral theses. These works not only suffer from the usual defects of dissertations. They also tend to be dominated, as I have mentioned, by a treatment of *On Certainty* that sees its main ideas as an extension of those in the *Investigations.* (The latter comment is true, for instance, of Morawetz's *Wittgenstein and Knowledge*, and I suspect, though I do not know for sure, that the former comment is as well.)

A corrective is needed that represents both mature scholarship and the recognition that *On Certainty* is a highly original work, in many fundamental ways quite different from the *Investigations.* In particular, the highly therapeutic thrust of the *Investigations* is much diminished in *On Certainty.* Wittgenstein is himself caught up in relatively straightforward, classical philosophical concerns about the nature of certainty and its relationship to human knowledge. One must, of course, not go overboard in stressing this difference.

As many commentators have correctly indicated, there is considerable continuity in Wittgenstein's writings, from early to late. Thus, in the *Tractatus* we find in 4.1272, an analysis of the sentence "There are objects" that prefigures his discussion of entries 35–37 in *On Certainty* (see chapter 7, which deals with those passages). Further, as I point out in chapter 6, Wittgenstein's "method" of dealing with philosophical problems, which reached its most mature form in the *Investigations,* is carried over without much change in *On Certainty.* Yet sometimes where there appears to be continuity there is difference. In 6.51 of the *Tractatus* we find the following remark about scepticism: "Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously senseless, when one wishes to doubt that which cannot be questioned. For doubt can only exist where a question exists; a question only where an answer exists, and these only where something can be said."

One might take this comment to be a prescient reference to scepticism as that is treated some thirty years later in *On Certainty,* and to do so would not be wholly wrong. The two treatments agree that scepticism is senseless. But the grounds offered for this judgment differ enormously; and, in fact, the later analysis is deeper and more sophisticated (see chapter 10 for details). So while not denying a degree of continuity in Wittgenstein's thinking, one is still justified in saying that there are significant differences between *On Certainty* and his earlier work, including the *Investigations.*

The simple answer, then, to the query of why another book on Wittgenstein is that it is about time the important but comparatively underground status of this work should be surfaced and its fundamental ideas be brought out in a way that focuses upon the relationship between Moore and Wittgenstein; hence this endeavor, which attempts to take some steps in those directions.

On Certainty has a dramatic history: how it came to be written in the first place, the timing and mode of its composition, the role it plays in the Wittgensteinian corpus as a new venture, and its unfinished, probative, Socratic character. Let me briefly speak to these matters in order to justify the attention it will receive in this book. As I pointed out earlier, Wittgenstein died in 1951, and given the vast amount of material that the executors of his *nachlass* had to work through it was not until 1969 that *On Certainty* was published. The fact that it appeared so late and that so much attention was still being paid to the *Philosophical Investigations* (published in 1953) explains to a great extent why the book was neglected until fairly recently. There is also another factor. *On Certainty* is a running commentary on three of G.E. Moore's greatest papers, "A Defense of Common Sense," "Proof of an External World," and "Certainty," which were published between 1925 and 1941.

Moore, who died in 1958, was one of the most celebrated philosophers of the pre-World War II period. But he had long since fallen out of favor by the time *On Certainty* was published. Consequently, many scholars did not fully grasp the importance of *On Certainty* because it can be understood only by reading it through the filter of Moore's essays, written more than a quarter of a century earlier, and this they had no interest in doing. To some degree this situation has been reversed. Moore's status in the past four or five years has begun to improve, and there is a greater awareness that he is a major figure in twentieth century philosophy.

With the growing appreciation of Moore, Wittgenstein's interpretation took on a new significance; a small but growing coterie of scholars now see it as the most profound examination of Moore's contributions to epistemology. But in the process of reading *On Certainty*, they have also come to realize that there is more to *On Certainty* than merely a commentary on Moore. They now realize that it contains a novel approach to the problem of certitude and to the sceptical challenges that any defender of certitude must face. My study emphasizes this feature of the book, which makes it of direct relevance to current issues in epistemology.

That scepticism continues to bedevil contemporary philosophers is attested to by the large number of books recently devoted to this subject: Barry Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984), P.F. Strawson's *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (1985), Robert Fogelin's *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (1985), Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (1986), Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer's *Knowledge and Scepticism* (1989), Kai Nielsen's *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (1989), and Leo Groarke's *Greek Scepticism* (1990).

On Certainty differs from any of Wittgenstein's other works in the way it came to be written. In 1949, two years before his death, and before it was diagnosed that he was suffering from cancer of the prostate, Wittgenstein visited his former student, Norman Malcolm, at Cornell. Some years earlier Malcolm had written an essay, "Moore and Ordinary Language," for a volume that appeared in 1942 in the Library of Living Philosophers series, edited by P.A. Schilpp, entitled *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore.* In that essay Malcolm argued that Moore's defense of the common sense view of the world was really a defense of the ordinary employments of language as against the extended and paradoxical uses that philosophers made of these idioms.

But some seven years later Malcolm changed his mind. In a paper entitled "Defending Common Sense," he claimed that in the philosophical contexts in which he was speaking, Moore had misused the expressions "I know," "I know with certainty," "It is certain," and "I have conclusive evidence." Malcolm contended that Moore's employment of these expressions ran counter to their ordinary and correct use and gave a number of powerful arguments in support of this contention. When Wittgenstein arrived at Cornell, Malcolm read him this paper, which was soon to be published in the *Philosophical Review.*

Wittgenstein had long been interested in Moore's defense of the common sense view of the world, and according to G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, had told Moore that "A Defense of Common Sense" was his best paper. Wittgenstein was impressed by Malcolm's claim that Moore was misusing such expressions as "I know that" and "I know that with certainty." When he returned to England, he began to write in his characteristic, apothegmatic fashion about the correct use of these expressions and then more extensively about the topic of certainty itself. These remarks formed an autonomous collection that was later published as *On Certainty.*

Scholars find a special fascination in this collection, which in its original, unedited form can be found at the recently opened Wittgenstein archives at the University of Bergen in Norway. The material is in an untitled notebook and without numbered entries (both of which were added by the editors). The pages

are lined, and one can distinguish the entries from one another because each is separated by a space of one line. The material, all handwritten, is in first draft form and unpolished, with all of the later entries dated by groups. It thus allows one to follow the progress of Wittgenstein's thought on the topic of certainty, which, in the shadow of death, occupied the last two years of his life. The progression shows a deepening sensitivity to its complexities and, unexpectedly, an increasing (though still critical) respect for Moore, the sort of respect that most of the commentators I have mentioned fail to notice.

That Wittgenstein became obsessed by the topic is clear: The last seven comments (670–676) were entered into his notebook two days before he died (April 29, 1951). *On Certainty*, which I shall discuss later, begins with the sorts of issues about Moore's use of "I know" that Malcolm had raised; the influence of Malcolm's paper on Wittgenstein is patent. For instance, in the sixth entry, Wittgenstein writes: "Now, can one enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off like that, I believe not—For otherwise the expression 'I know' gets misused. And through this misuse a queer and extremely important mental state seems to be revealed."

But, as I indicated above, Wittgenstein carried the issues surrounding the notion of certainty much farther than either Malcolm or Moore, and it is in the depth and originality of his inquiry that the importance of *On Certainty* lies. The outcome of that inquiry was a philosophical masterpiece comparable to the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations.*

Let's assume that we have made a reasonable case for writing another book about Wittgenstein. We now face the questions: Then why a book that is almost equally about Moore? Why not deemphasize Moore, referring to him only where necessary, and concentrate on Wittgenstein, patently the greater figure? To these queries a compelling response is more difficult, but I believe the case can be made. A little history will help us see how.

I have mentioned that *On Certainty* is a running commentary on three of Moore's essays. Moore lived for another seven years after Wittgenstein had inserted its final seven entries, but Moore probably never saw it. It lay unedited, buried in the huge Wittgensteinian *nachlass* until the late 1960s. Apart from his interest in the conceptual issues those papers raised, Wittgenstein might well have had another motive for writing about Moore. In the 1930s Moore had written an extensive, highly critical commentary on a set of lectures Wittgenstein had given shortly after his return to Cambridge, and Wittgenstein might have used *On Certainty* to respond to them. That commentary, entitled "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–33," was included in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, posthumously published in 1959.

The period 1930–1933 represented a transitional epoch in Wittgenstein's philosophical development. At the time he was struggling to create a new method for dealing with philosophical problems. In these lectures the nature of philosophical activity was thus a dominant issue; it had also been, of course, a central theme in the *Tractatus.* In the Tractarian view philosophy has nothing to do with the natural sciences. Scientific activity issues in significant sentences about the world, but philosophical activity does not. Philosophical pronounce-