Certainties and the Bedrock of Moral Reasoning: Three Ways the Spade Turns

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Abstract

In this paper, we identify and explain three kinds of bedrock in moral thought. The term "bedrock," as introduced by Wittgenstein in §217 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, stands for the end of a chain of reasoning. We affirm that some chains of moral reasoning do indeed end with *certainty*. However, different kinds of certainties in morality work in different ways. In the course of systematizing the different types of certainties, we argue that present accounts of certainties in morality do not reflect their diversity. Our analysis yields three types of moral certainty: QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS, and TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES. We show that the first two types can, at least to some extent, be intelligibly doubted. Therefore, they do not possess the characteristics that would classify them as bedrock in the strictest sense. TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES cannot likewise be doubted because they are rules that enable moral thinking. Thus, deviating from them is unintelligible. We shall argue that all three types reflect ways in which moral language games come to an end, while only one, TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES, displays the characteristic of being solid bedrock.

Keywords

Moral reasoning; regress stopper; moral certainty; thinking guides; non-bipolar propositions

1 Introduction: An Ultimately Binding Character of Morality?

The idea that morality is based on an unquestionable foundation has gained prominence among moral philosophers. Notably, there is a growing body of literature inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy that argues for such an understanding of morality (e.g., Diamond, 2019; Pleasants, 2008, 2009, 2015). This view of the nature of morality is enticing as it seems that many people expect morality to provide us with a non-arbitrary and solid orientation, in the sense of clear indications of what is right (and allowed) or wrong in our lives (e.g., Rini, 2013; Scanlon, 1992). This expectation may include the view that some actions are indefensible, certainly wrong, or even unthinkable—such as killing someone simply for the thrill of it (Scanlon, 1992, 6). The understanding underlying such intuitions may be that morality should abstract "away from the individual thinker's present personal perspective" (Rini, 2013, 262) and be guided by undoubtable propositions that do not allow for deviation. These propositions, then, are authoritative and can be invoked to dispel the confusion of anyone seeking to argue or think otherwise. Underlying such an understanding of morality seems to be the idea that moral thinking has a binding character in the sense that chains of justification come to an end.

This idea of the binding character of morality can be found in many influential accounts of moral philosophy. In one such account, Ernst Tugendhat provides an everyday example of how chains of justification come to an end: consider a parent who needs to cut the cake at a children's birthday party. The children all want the largest slice they can get. If no child can advance a convincing reason why their piece should be larger than everyone else's, then the cake must be divided into equal pieces (Tugendhat, 1993, 378). As equals, the children are to be treated equally. Indeed, it goes without saying that equals are to be treated equally. Mentioning this rule of thought explicitly, as we just did, is odd because it does not add anything to the example that was not already understood. However, if the rule is violated—if, for instance, one child receives a bigger slice than the others—protest will clearly follow: "Hey, why does she get a bigger slice?"

Ultimately, such protest can be explained as resting on the background rule that equals are to be treated equally. We shall argue that this rule is a precondition for moral reasoning and hence should be denoted a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY in morals. Such a rule goes without saying and neither *needs* to be justified nor *can* be. A distribution that deviates from it can be justified only by giving reasons, for example, that the birthday child gets the biggest slice because it is their birthday (whether this is a good or bad reason is a different question). This, however, does not mean that equals are treated unequally but that there is a reason to regard the birthday child as unequal to the other children (in virtue of being the birthday child), rendering it permissible

to treat them unequally.[1] This is in line with the implications of the identified rule: equals are to be treated equally, *and* unequals may be treated unequally. As will become clear below, if this rule is abandoned, attempts at justification lose their intelligibility. The rule is undoubtable and allows for no deviation, and as such it represents a certainty in morals.

The argumentation in this paper will be based on a critical examination of the growing literature regarding certainties in morality, particularly focusing on the perspectives of moral philosophers such as Cora Diamond (2019) and Nigel Pleasants (2008, 2009, 2015), who claim, inspired by Wittgenstein's philosophy, that certain chains of moral reasoning end in *certainty*. In other words, they claim that moral thought rests on certainties in morality. The main characteristic of a certainty in morality is that it is undoubtable—deviating from it is unthinkable. Interestingly, the binding character of morality in such an understanding is not displayed by the justification of "certainty statements" but rather by the absence of justifications. Certainty, in this sense, marks the boundary of the unintelligible.

In this paper, we shall critically affirm the importance of certainties in morality (i.e., the claim that rational moral thought rests on certainties). We shall show, in agreement with the literature on certainties in morality, that such certainties put an end to a chain of reasoning (Diamond, 2019; Hermann, 2015; Johnson, 2019; Pleasants, 2008, 2009, 2015). In Wittgenstein's words: "Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned" (*PI* §217; see also *OC* §248).[2] According to the literature, certainties in morals are part of the bedrock in Wittgenstein's sense. But we depart from existing accounts by arguing that certainties in morality *in the strictest* sense (i.e., bedrock in the strictest sense) are not propositions but rules that, by themselves, do not contain any particular moral content or knowledge. This idea has not been discussed in the literature so far and introduces a major twist for the debate on certainties. What is fully certain in morality is not a collection of undoubtable propositions or beliefs but the forms of thinking, the rules, that enable moral language use in the first place—such as the abovementioned rule that equals are to be treated equally. Although all accounts discussed in this paper point to this indispensable, *transcendental* trait of certainties, implied by Wittgenstein himself (*OC* §341), they fail to reflect it appropriately. As we shall see, capturing the diversity of moral certainties requires differentiating among different ways in which bedrock can be reached.

[1] Strictly speaking, "if x and y are equal, then x and y are to be treated equally" does not entail "If x and y are not equal, then x and y are not to be treated equally." P → Q does not entail ~P → ~Q. P might be *sufficient* for Q without being *necessary* for Q.

[2] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) will henceforth be abbreviated as *PI* and Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969) as *OC.*

In other words, certainties function as "regress stoppers" (Sayre-McCord, 1996) by putting an end to the chain of reasoning in different ways. With bedrock reached in the strictest sense, justifications can no longer be provided or requested because they would no longer be intelligible. Thus, regress stoppers function as the ultimate foundations of our reasoning and conduct and therefore can explain the *ultimately binding character* of morality introduced above. In the following, we shall explore the variety of types of regress stoppers, which rests on the difference between the formal and material aspects of certainty. The former encompasses undoubtable rules; the latter, propositions whose content is certain to some extent. That certainties can be distinguished in this way follows from a detailed examination of Diamond's (2019) work on what have come to be called thinking guides, the analysis of which is the subject of the next section.

2 Thinking Guides in Morality

2.1 Diamond's account of path-indicators

In *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics* (2019), Cora Diamond offers a particularly interesting account of undoubtable propositions by drawing on Wittgenstein's earlier and later philosophy. Although she does not make explicit use of the term 'moral certainty', some of her writings in this book can be classified as contributions to this debate. Discussion of Diamond's idea of thinking guides in morality will show that certainties in morality have a material and a formal aspect.

Diamond has argued that some moral propositions are *non-bipolar*. If a proposition or belief is *bipolar*, then it can be either true *or* false. Some propositions and beliefs are not bipolar because they are not matters of debate or disagreement. That not all propositions have a bipolar structure is a central component of Diamond's (2019) account of "thinking guides"[3] in moral reasoning. These "thinking guides" lead moral thought in a non-bipolar way. Diamond illustrates this with the proposition "slavery is unjust and insupportable." Attempting to deny this proposition, results, she claims, in nothing but nonsense.[4] That is the sense in which the proposition is certain: its negation, which implies that slavery is justifiable or supportable, is not simply wrong or irrational—it is "thought that has *gone astray*" (Diamond, 2019, 205; emphasis in the original).

[3] This term was coined by Kuusela (2020) in reference to Diamond's work on path-indicators.

[4] Here, Diamond is echoing David Wiggins, who similarly contends that one eventually comes to see "that there is *nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable" (Wiggins, 1991, 70; emphasis in the original).

Diamond develops the idea that non-bipolar propositions are "path-indicators" that are "either blockers of false paths or indications of open and useful ones" (Diamond, 2019, 233). Their function is quite straightforward: "In a variety of different sorts of cases, the structure of thought and debate may involve propositions the role of which is to block paths of thought, or to indicate their availability and significance" (Diamond, 2019, 233). Path-indicators are thus tools in our endeavors to think well. Thus, it makes sense to follow Oskari Kuusela (2020) in calling them "thinking guides."

Thinking guides play regulative roles in moral reasoning by directing thought or helping to redirect thinking that has gone astray. As Diamond (2019, 267) contends:

> [W]e may stand in need of, or find useful, many different sorts of path-indicators, both of the kind that block paths of thought we may be tempted to take, and also of the kind that indicate open paths of thought which it may be important for us to be aware of, but which habits of ease-in-thinking make invisible to us, or enable us to go on not seeing.

How does Diamond arrive at this view of thinking guides? In her discussion, Diamond begins with statements that lack the bipolarity of senseful propositions but that nonetheless make sense, such as Elizabeth Anscombe's well-known example "'Someone' is not the name of someone." Diamond emphasizes that there is no possibility that such propositions are false because their opposition "is mere muddle" (Diamond, 2019, 203)—their negation, "when examined, peters out into nothingness" (Diamond, 2019, 204). Following Wittgenstein's *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1976), Diamond characterizes such statements, including "I am not dead" and "2 + 2 = 4," as "preparatory" to engagement in language (Diamond, 2019, 218). The role of preparatory uses of language is to "[enable] other types of uses of propositions" (Diamond, 2019, 264) such as inequalities like "$2 \times 24 \neq 46$" (Diamond, 2019, 259). These preparatory uses are required, then, to make language uses meaningful. By the same token, they are themselves, in a very practical sense, "useful": they can "bring someone out of confusion and back into engaged life" (Diamond, 2019, 219).[5] Accordingly, preparatory uses of language set out paths that are open for thinking and block others that are not open in that way.

According to Diamond's account, preparatory uses of language are *non-bipolar* propositions. These provide the undoubtable foundations for thinking. They cannot be doubted because their

[5] Kuusela (2020) criticizes the criterion of usefulness, because something that counts as useful may turn out to be not morally desirable.

negations are nonsense. What, other than nonsense, would it be if one were to claim—with full sincerity—that "now, in this particular moment, I'm not alive, I'm dead"? Such a thought cannot be successfully entertained, except perhaps metaphorically or in a joke or fairy tale. Diamond accordingly concludes that any sincere attempt at thinking that might contradict non-bipolar propositions "is nothing but a piece of confusion" (Diamond, 2019, 218).

Thus, non-bipolar propositions function, to use a term from Wittgenstein's later thought, as "hinges" (*OC* §341) that make it possible to use other propositions.[6] This has far-reaching implications for morality. Following David Wiggins, Diamond illustrates the importance of non-bipolar propositions in moral thought by comparing the statement that "slavery is unjust and insupportable" with "7 + 5 = 12." In these cases, she suggests, there is nothing to be thought but that slavery is unjust and insupportable, just as there is nothing to be thought but that 7 + 5 = 12 (Diamond, 2019, 232).

These two propositions are, according to Diamond, equally certain, in the sense that attempts to doubt them produce nonsense. According to Wiggins, this becomes apparent when we draw "upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding" (Wiggins, 1991, 70). Eventually, we shall be left with "nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable" (Wiggins, 1991, 70). However, someone might *insist* that 7 + 5 = 11 or that it is not unthinkable that 7 + 5 = 11. One who did so—seeing no binding, logical character in "7 + 5 = 12"—would have "opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another" (Wiggins, 1991, 70). Likewise, if you think of "slavery [as] not being unjust and insupportable, you are at risk of depriving yourself of the possibility of putting together a workable system of moral ideas" (Diamond, 2019, 218; see also Wiggins, 1991, 70–71).

This is Diamond's core claim about thinking guides in morality: that, were we to think that slavery is just or supportable, we would deprive ourselves of a workable system of moral ideas. She concludes that "slavery is just and supportable" must be unintelligible. But does this statement have the same binding character as a (non-bipolar) equation? Contra Diamond, we shall show that path-blockers such as this are QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS that are not non-bipolar in the sense that applies to "7 + 5 = 12." As we shall see, Diamond's conclusion results from a conflation of propositions in thought and rules of thought.

2.2 A critique of Diamond's account of thinking guides

[6] Note that Diamond does not use that term.

As regards the injustice of slavery, Diamond argues that what is intelligible has changed over time (Diamond, 2019, 304–306). During the US debate over slavery in the 1830s, it was intelligible both to defend and to attack slavery. There were, so to speak, two rival belief systems.[7] Today, Diamond suggests, a defense of slavery would no longer be intelligible, and thinking guides serve to reflect the non-intelligibility of such thinking. Gilad Nir summarizes this point: "In Diamond's view, the truths expressed by these propositions are so deeply embedded in our manner of thinking that they may seem utterly trivial to us" (Nir, 2022, 195). These are "undeniable truths" (Nir, 2022, 196) that can guide someone out of confusion.

We agree with Nir that such thinking guides are vitally important tools for guiding moral thought *well* and for leading it out of confusion. We disagree, however, as regards their establishing undeniable truths or transcendental certainties in morality. In line with Diamond and Nir, we regard non-bipolar propositions as foundational because they make language use *in general* possible. They serve as a foundation by providing language with an ultimately binding character. However, we also think that the slavery example does not qualify as bedrock in the strictest sense. To meet that standard, a statement would have to be fully undoubtable and thus also non-bipolar.

For the sake of argument, note that there is a possible, intelligible opposite, namely pro-slavery advocacy. This position is heinous, pernicious, and repugnant for construing humans as property. However, even though the thinking that leads to such a position has gone *wrong*, it has not "gone *astray* as thinking" (*pace* Diamond and Nir) in the same sense as thinking that leads to denying that 7 + 5 = 12.

Diamond seeks to establish a robust structure of morality that resists moral relativism's "insidious presumption of symmetry between points of view" (Wiggins, 1991, 78)—for example, that you can either think of slavery as unjust and insupportable *or* not. The idea is that the latter view should not be an option for appropriate moral thinking. To strengthen this argument, Diamond invokes the fact that most pro-slavery thinkers shared the same moral vocabulary as their opponents. Even if they were insisting that slavery in the Southern states was profitable, they were, as Diamond notes, sharing moral concepts such as justice: "The main point here, then, is that, in various ways, people may *turn off* the issue of the application to themselves (or to particular others) of some concept that they do use in an ordinary way in other circumstances" (Diamond, 2019, 275). The concepts of justice and respect for humanity were as fully available to pro-slavery advocates as to their opponents. Consequently, a sign was

[7] As Diamond (2019) shows, the belief systems were by far less binary and rigid than one might assume.

(metaphorically speaking) erected with the "statement that men are by nature equal, or the statement that all men are created equal" (Diamond, 2019, 287)—a warning against taking the heinous pro-slavery path. Talk about slavery *should* leave you "with nothing to think but that it is odious, unjust, an intolerable evil" (Diamond, 2019, 277). Diamond's line of thought here reflects a workable system of moral ideas. However, crucially, it consists of statements that convey content and, hence, can be doubted. Therefore, they are not undoubtable and do not meet the criterion for non-bipolarity.

To show the importance of path-indicators in moral thought, Diamond draws on Wiggins's idea that, in the face of discrepancies in belief, *convergence* of beliefs is possible through a "vindicatory explanation." Such an explanation takes the following form: "there is really nothing else to think but that p; so it is a fact that p; so, given the circumstances and given the subject's cognitive capacities and opportunities and given his access to what leaves nothing else to think but that p, no wonder he believes that p" (Wiggins, 1991, 66). Through a vindicatory explanation, one *comes to see* that slavery is unjust and insupportable, and that, as a result, this proposition is necessary and certain. It is important to note that Wiggins accounts for the possibility that people *eventually come to see* that there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable. After all, people might initially be wrong and confused and eventually change their minds. Following this line of thought, one might be inclined to state that what seemed to be intelligible at a certain point in history can become unintelligible over time—think, for instance, of witch hunts.

But does the intelligibility of a proposition change over time? Is it not possible to recall the hideous arguments that were put forward in the 1830s to justify slavery? Is it not even sometimes necessary to recall this kind of thinking to strengthen the point that these paths of thinking *should* be blocked? Think of the testimony of people such as Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass who witnessed the atrocities of slavery—isn't it useful to draw on their stories to demonstrate the injustice of slavery for present and future generations? Such considerations indicate that the statement about the injustice of slavery actually has bipolar structure, contrary to what Diamond and Nir suggest. As such, it is (only) a QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITION. Such propositions are shared and *should* not be doubted. Their negations are taboo for good reasons. However, they have *material* contents that *can* be doubted—albeit at the cost of moral condemnation. They stop the regress with a strong moral conviction; their negations have highly counterintuitive implications; therefore, they *should not* be doubted. However, because they *can* be doubted, they do not fully qualify as "bedrock" in the strictest Wittgensteinian sense.

In summary, the moral propositions that form "thinking guides" can be framed as being certain in a particular way: they are *quasi-undoubtably certain*. Diamond's path-indicators are necessary for thinking *well*; they guide thinking in a morally desirable direction. As such, they rest on argumentation (i.e., on asking for and giving reasons with propositional contents). Such thinking guides do function as regress stoppers, but not in the way claimed by Diamond. QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS provide the moral foundations for *acceptable* moral thought and conduct. When such QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS are violated, moral taboos are broken. That is the sense in which a thinking guide stops the regress of asking for reasons. However, Diamond's thinking guides in morality lack the non-bipolar and rule-like character of "7 + 5 = 12."

In fact, "7 + 5 = 12" is not a proposition or belief at all but a rule. Owing to its logical nature, a calculation has the binding character of a certainty and thus reaches bedrock in its strictest sense. While attempts to defend or justify slavery are brought to an end by arguments that it is heinous and vicious, disputes over calculations do not come to an end in the same way. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish between the *material* and *formal* aspects of certainty. The material aspect captures the (quasi-)undoubtable nature of some propositions and beliefs, as in the slavery example discussed by Diamond and Wiggins. The moral validity of their stance on slavery is not in doubt, but this is because it has been immunized against doubt over time, with great effort—and rightly so! Still, it has been *made* quasi-non-bipolar in the course of history. As a moral belief, the injustice of slavery has not always been certain; it was moral debates and insights that revealed it to be certain. In contrast, a non-bipolar rule—reflecting the formal aspect of certainty—has a universally binding character that is essentially devoid of any moral content. It is binding for *all* across context and time. For Wittgenstein, logic, including calculations, reflects the *transcendental* feature of language and thought (*OC* §501). In other words, logic is indisputable. Logic precedes language games and contains no meaning in itself, while propositions have content that can be reflected on as meaningful.

So far, we have seen that certainty can be analyzed in terms of its material and formal aspects. The formal aspect of certainty is reflected in rules such as those of mathematics and logic. In Section 4, we shall see that the rule "equals are to be treated equally" belongs in the same category. Such rules share the trait of being *transcendental* in the sense that they do not contain or convey content themselves; rather, by functioning as preparatory uses of language, they serve as foundations enabling intelligible thought. However, we turn first to a slightly different aspect of material certainty, involving CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS—propositions that function similarly to truisms in justification.

3 Basic Moral Certainties

3.1 The current debate on basic moral certainties

In critiquing Diamond's thinking guides, we proposed that certainties can be analyzed in terms of their material aspect (content) and/or their formal aspect (rule-like function). Using Diamond's arguments, we identified the criteria for qualifying as a formal certainty in morals and showed that her core example is not a formal but a material certainty as it remains on the level of content. To further inform the proposed meaning of "material certainties"—i.e., (QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE) CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS—we draw on the current debate about "basic moral certainties." A critical discussion of this debate strengthens the motivation for differentiating certainties in accordance with their material and formal aspects. Notably, like Diamond, the main advocates for basic moral certainty, particularly Pleasants (2008, 2009, 2015), implicitly defend what we denote as the formal aspect of certainty but suggest candidates that fail to exemplify it.

Pleasants (2008, 2009, 2015) coined the term "basic moral certainties" and has discussed such certainties the most prominently and prolifically, drawing on Wittgenstein's discussion of epistemic certainty in *On Certainty*. Pleasants' influential writings are the basis of both affirmative (Galli, 2023; Hermann, 2015; Johnson, 2019; Laves, 2020, 2021; O'Hara, 2018) and critical (Ariso, 2020, 2021; Brice, 2013; Deininger et al., 2022; Fairhurst, 2019; Glock, 2023; Kusch, 2021, 2023; Manhire, 2022) accounts of moral certainty. Pleasants' ideas will be the present focus, followed in the next subsection by the critical reception of his writings.

The proposed examples of basic moral certainties most debated in the literature are "killing is wrong" and "death is bad" (both discussed in Pleasants, 2008, 2009, 2015). Other enticing examples of moral certainty have been offered, most notably by Julia Hermann and Jeremy Johnson, including "cheating is wrong" (Johnson, 2019, 206) and "promises have to be kept" (Hermann, 2015, 99–100). This paper focuses on the example that has received the most attention, Pleasants' basic moral certainty that "killing is wrong."[8]

According to Pleasants, killing "an innocent and non-threatening person" is not a matter of being right or wrong (Pleasants, 2009, 677); to claim that it is wrong is not the result of an argument against killing. Pleasants argues that we "have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for regarding […] killing [as] wrong, just as we have no evidence, reasons, or grounds for acting in ways that presuppose that we believe our hands will not fall off in use, or that we are

[8] Space restrictions preclude a detailed discussion of these examples, but as will become clear in the following, we believe that our criticism applies to them as well. See also fn. 13 for a brief discussion of these examples.

incorrigibly authoritative on what our name is" (Pleasants, 2009, 677). So, condemning killing as wrong does not require adding that it is wrong to kill innocent and non-threatening people. According to Pleasants, this addition "would not merely be redundant, it would betray a lack of moral sensibility" (Pleasants, 2009, 677). As a basic moral certainty, the wrongness of killing "underlies everyone's—conservative, liberal or radical—moral and political opinions and judgements" (Pleasants, 2009, 679).

Pleasants introduces the wrongness of killing by way of the wrongness of killing an innocent, unthreatening person. However, he seems to advocate that the wrongness of killing as such is a basic moral certainty: "the wrongness of killing *as such* is so blatant that few see any need to ask, never mind answer, it [why it is wrong]" (Pleasants, 2009, 672; our emphasis). Pleasants seems to hold that killing is usually wrong because acts of killing "unjustly inflict death, pain and other modes of suffering on people" (Pleasants, 2015, 202). The possibility of justified exceptions does not violate the underlying certainty. Thus, for Pleasants, "killing is wrong," together with other basic moral certainties, forms the indubitable bedrock for moral thinking.

As defined in the debate, basic moral certainties are understood as the background against which meaningful moral claims can be made (Johnson, 2019, 211). Although some moral statements and beliefs are open to discussion, basic moral certainties turn out *not* to be questionable and thus resist skeptical inquiries (Rummens 2013). Basic moral certainties, such as the wrongness of killing, serve as "fundamental condition[s] of human morality as such" (Pleasants, 2015, 201). As Pleasants suggests, it is certain for us that we must not kill an innocent and non-threatening person. This is simply how we think and act within our moral community. Nobody (besides philosophers) would doubt that killing is wrong. A person who thinks that killing fellow humans is perfectly acceptable in ordinary circumstances would—justifiably—be regarded as morally alien as they would not be participating in the same form of life as the rest of us. That form of life is expressed in our shared moral beliefs, which themselves rest on a bedrock made up of basic moral certainties.

Pleasants argues that his examples display basic moral certainty in the sense that they "cannot be sensefully asserted, explained, justified, questioned, or denied first-personally; and indeed no-one would even think of doing so outside a philosophical debate on the phenomenon" (Pleasants, 2015, 200). Thus, as a basic moral certainty, the statement "killing is wrong" is certain "because its wrongness cannot sensefully be asserted, explained or doubted" (Pleasants, 2015, 201). Therefore, basic moral certainties are "immune to justification, challenge and doubt, and hence cannot be objects of first-personal knowledge" (Pleasants, 2015, 197),

because what "is truly foundational is something which nothing imaginable would speak against" (Johnson, 2019, 213). According to this line of reasoning, moral thinking, just as with thinking as such, is founded on basic moral certainties that are not "claims that might turn out to be wrong. They are the background against which and the foundation upon which meaningful claims can be made which might turn out to be wrong. *They are not grounds for belief, they are the ground of belief*" (Johnson, 2019, 211; emphasis added).

Pleasants and his followers (see especially Hermann, 2015 and Johnson, 2019, but also Galli, 2023 and Laves, 2021) understand basic moral certainties, following Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2004), as "non-propositional," meaning that they cannot be negated like "normal" propositions. Their negations are not false but unimaginable and unintelligible. Moyal-Sharrock notes that some propositions, namely "hinge propositions" (see *OC* §341), are *non-propositional grammatical rules* as they "are divested of their propositional status inasmuch as their nature is similar to propositions of mathematics; that is, inasmuch as they are not empirically derived, and are therefore not candidates for doubt, verification or falsification" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 39). In other words: hinge propositions such as basic moral certainties lack bipolarity (i.e., susceptibility of being either true or false), which is the core characteristic of a "normal" proposition.[9]

Much has been said thus far about the nature of basic moral certainty but little about how such certainties function in moral reasoning. Johnson argues that basic moral certainties function as "pseudo-premises" that can be omitted from any argument as they add nothing of substance: "They mark out the *form*, not the content, of our practical reasoning" (Johnson, 2019, 213; emphasis added). (Note that here Johnson explicitly highlights the formal aspect of certainty.) A genuine basic moral certainty must meet this criterion of being a pseudo-premise. Johnson illustrates the functioning of such certainties with the following example: "If you were to parachute from 30m, you would probably die. Therefore, you should not parachute from 30m" (Johnson, 2019, 213). The pseudo-premise, which can be left out without losing anything, would be "you should not do anything that is likely to result in your death" (Johnson, 2019, 213).[10] To put this in formal terms:

[9] We wish to emphasize that the introduced terminology may be prone to confusion on first sight: Moyal-Sharrock thinks of hinge propositions as *non-propositional*. Hinge propositions are, as Moyal-Sharrock highlights, not propositions in the regular sense as they are divested of their propositional status which makes them, e.g., logically indubitable. Therefore, it is helpful to understand hinge propositions as non-propositional grammatical rules to differentiate them from "normal" propositions which are not logically indubitable.

[10] Space restrictions preclude a detailed discussion of this example. However, as the next subsection will make clear, the critique given there applies here as well. In summary, it states that although a pseudo-premise typically does not need to be made explicit, it can, contrary to Johnson and Pleasants, be intelligibly doubted in certain circumstances (see also fn. 13).

P_1: If you were to parachute from 30m, you would probably die.

(Pseudo-Premise P_0: You should not do anything that is likely to result in your death.)

C: Therefore, you should not parachute from 30m.

'Pseudo-premise' is indeed an enticing term for describing moral certainty, particularly its formal aspect and how it functions in moral reasoning. But Johnson's proposed pseudo-premise—like all other proposed candidates for basic moral certainty—fails to reflect the formal characteristics of basic moral certainties as defended by him and Pleasants. However, we agree with the definition of a pseudo-premise as being logically necessary for thinking without needing to be made explicit for arguments to be recognizably valid.

Following this review of the literature on basic moral certainties, it should be clear that they are what Diamond calls non-bipolar propositions—propositions that cannot be sensefully negated and that function as preparatory uses of language, setting out paths that are open for thinking. In light of this, attempts to deny moral certainties, rather than being wrong, amount to thinking that goes off the rails. We agree with Pleasants and his followers that moral thinking ultimately rests on common ground that cannot be disputed and that certainties function as regress stoppers. The problem, as we shall now show, is that basic moral certainties such as "killing is wrong" cannot fulfill the *formal* criterion (set by the advocates themselves!) for being bedrock in its strictest sense. Although Pleasants and his followers ascribe an indisputable, transcendental nature to moral certainties, the examples they provide convey content that can be doubted. Still, they are, as we shall now show, part of the bedrock in a less strict sense.

3.2 A critique of basic moral certainties

Here, we shall argue that the candidate basic moral certainties mentioned above—e.g., "killing is wrong"—are what we shall call CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS.[11] Owing to their propositional structure, their negations can be entertained in certain circumstances. It is possible to imagine opposition to the beliefs reflected in these certainties. Such opposition rests on intelligible grounds. Importantly, the grounds for these beliefs can be reasonably doubted and hence do not meet the criterion put forward by Pleasants and his followers for qualifying as a bedrock moral certainty. This is not to attack the idea of basic moral certainty as indisputable bedrock but to

[11] At the end of this section, it should have become clear that CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS resemble truisms in that they are generally accepted as obviously true, having been repeated so often that it has become superfluous to make them explicit. They reflect the material aspect of certainty and are therefore comparable to QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS. Both types of certainty convey content that can be doubted. However, as shall become clear in the remainder of this section, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS are more general in their nature, whereas QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS represent concrete moral taboos encompassing a rich moral history. While both types of certainties are similar in their function as regress stoppers, QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS come closer to being undoubtable, as their history has impregnated them against doubt.

show that Pleasants and his followers fail to acknowledge the diversity of types of moral certainty. Pleasants' example of the wrongness of killing will be the focus here as some philosophers have objected to this at length (especially Ariso, 2020 and Brice, 2013). The results below, however, will differ from those of Pleasants' critics.

We shall argue that, *in particular circumstances*, these seemingly unquestionable certainties become questionable. The examples provided in the literature on basic moral certainties involve propositions that *seem* to be certain, but their content can nonetheless be doubted. Therefore, they do not meet the authors' own formal criterion of being non-propositional. For instance, although Pleasants introduces "killing is wrong" to exemplify an unquestionable certainty, this example contains *propositional* content and can therefore be reasonably doubted. It is very likely that the arguments for denying these propositions will not *satisfy* everybody, but they are nonetheless *intelligible*.

Pleasants and his followers are wrong to hold that their suggested examples of basic moral certainties cannot sensefully be justified; instead, these propositions have only been immunized against doubt. As Kusch (2023) notes, this does not prevent them from being reflected on or doubted. For instance, it is *usually* wrong to kill. A community relies on such beliefs to make peaceful coexistence and, with it, morality work. But it also thrives by discussing and disputing possible exceptions. Such certainties come close to describing what W. D. Ross (2022) called *prima facie* duties, but they allow for exceptions in particular circumstances. For instance, although it is taken as a certainty that killing is wrong, there was a debate in Austria, at the time of writing, about the admissibility of assisted suicide. Rational arguments for or against this are possible, potentially (depending on one's perspective) with the result that *in certain circumstances* killing is not wrong but good—and even perhaps a positive duty. Furthermore, in the case of mercy killing, reasons can be given for deviating from the statement that killing is always wrong—even if the situation in which this is true is an unfortunate one. Thus, the purported wrongness of killing is certainly not immune to being questioned and debated. It follows that it is possible to doubt that killing is wrong *tout court*.

The status of "killing is wrong" as an indispensable certainty has also been contested by other philosophers. There is an interesting discussion about whether the wrongness of killing is a local (Ariso, 2020, 2021; Brice, 2013) or a universal (Laves, 2021; Galli, 2023) moral certainty. Critical reflection on this debate will clarify what we mean by a diversity of types of certainty in morality.

José María Ariso (2020, 2021) claims that the wrongness of killing is a local moral certainty. Ariso draws this terminology from Moyal-Sharrock's (2004) taxonomy of Wittgenstein's epistemic certainties. Local certainties "constitute the underlying framework of knowledge of all or only some human beings at a given time (e.g., 'The earth is flat'; 'The earth is round'; 'Human beings cannot go to the moon'; 'Human beings can go to the moon')" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 102). Universal certainties, in contrast, "delimit the universal bounds of sense for us: they are *ungiveupable* certainties for all normal human beings" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 103; emphasis in the original). Pleasants and his followers take their moral certainties to be certainties of the latter kind.

Ariso applies Moyal-Sharrock's terminology to the debate on basic moral certainties. He claims that the wrongness of killing is not a universal certainty as there are or have been communities who have not shared this certainty, such as the *pisa-suaves*, children born into Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) to fight against the Colombian army (Ariso, 2020, 62–63). Indoctrinated by the FARC, these children "were not acquainted with the concepts of 'morally right' or 'morally wrong'" (Ariso, 2020, 63). From this depiction of the *pisa-suaves*, Ariso concludes that there are communities that do not perceive the wrongness of killing as a universal moral certainty. A universal moral certainty would not allow for exceptions, regardless of community membership. "The moral certainty about the wrongness of killing is therefore a local certainty because it allows for variations over time and depends upon each community" (Ariso, 2020, 69).

Samuel Laves (2021) and Enrico Galli (2023) object to Ariso's argument. Laves (2021, 80) points out that Pleasants is not claiming that *all* killing is wrong but that the wrongness of killing an *innocent, non-threatening* person is a universal basic moral certainty (see also Pleasants, 2009, 677). The wrongness here is attributable to the person's status as innocent and non-threatening. Based on this clarification of Pleasants' arguments, Laves concludes that the *pisa-suaves* in fact conform to the universal moral certainty that killing is wrong as they differentiate between enemies, whom they regard as non-innocent, and others (Laves, 2021, 86). Thus, while "the certainty itself is universal, its manifestations are variable across cultures and times" (Laves, 2021, 88). Galli (2023), meanwhile, argues that either the *pisa-suaves* are moral agents violating a basic moral certainty that they possess or—if they really lack the moral certainty that killing is wrong—they do not share our form of life, and their language games would not fully align with ours. In either case, the wrongness of killing would not be disqualified as a universal certainty.

While we appreciate that the authors recognize diversity among moral certainties (by distinguishing between universal and local certainties), we think that they do not sufficiently address the problem with Pleasants' account. We hold that "killing is wrong," while universal in scope, is not a certainty in the sense of an *ungiveupable* hinge proposition. A universal certainty delimits the bounds of sense and would not allow for exceptions. As we have seen, this is not the case with "killing is wrong." Laves and Galli acknowledge that there is room for debate as to who is innocent and non-threatening but maintain that the certainty itself is universal. Although the view that killing is wrong is probably shared by all human communities, as long as there is room to debate what kinds of killing are wrong or who counts as unthreatening and innocent, the bounds of sense have not yet been reached as they would have to be for a genuine universal certainty.

So, the wrongness of killing is not a universal, indispensable certainty. But it is not a merely local certainty either. For as Galli (2023) rightly points out, those who would not understand that killing is usually wrong would not share our form of life, and thus their language games would not fully align with ours. This belief about the wrongness of killing is (probably) shared by all human beings. Therefore, we regard the shared belief that killing is wrong as what we call a CERTAIN PROPOSITION rather than as a local or universal certainty. We suggest that this belief is shared universally by human communities but is not universal in the sense of delimiting the bounds of sense. Usually, it is wrong to kill, *but* there are meaningful exceptions to that proposition. The important work is done by the conjunction 'but.'

Let us look more closely at what Pleasants seeks to show in arguing that "killing is wrong" is a basic moral certainty. Both Pleasants and Laves have noted that what is wrong is not all killing but unjustified killing, or the killing of a non-threatening and innocent person. Pleasants refers to how Wittgenstein himself allowed for basic certainties to be doubted in *certain, extraordinary* circumstances without causing us to question and abandon such certainties altogether. An example is the basic empirical certainty "my hands exist" (*OC* §150). There "can be (extraordinary) circumstances in which someone might be mistaken in the claim to be in possession of their hand—in the turmoil of battlefield carnage, for example" (Pleasant, 2008, 262). The existence of extraordinary circumstances allowing for this very specific local doubt, Pleasants suggests, does not take away from the fact that in any normal circumstance this empirical certainty is fundamental to all human beings.

We find this only partly convincing. Granted, such certainties may allow for exceptions, such as the case of mercy killing considered above. Still, it is not certain what counts as mercy killing

or who counts as innocent and non-threatening. To *some extent*, the wrongness of killing is certain—we need not revisit the question in every single instance of killing. It is desirable that communities act on this belief without making it explicit or an issue of constant justification. But, as Brice (2013) points out, this is something that is not naturally inherent in our form of life and certain for us but rather reinforced through our social upbringing. Who counts as a 'person' and 'innocent' has not always been unequivocally agreed upon but has been a matter of debate across contexts and cultures (Brice 2013, 484–86). The group of cases in which we regard it as wrong to kill is thus, as Brice suggests, something that has been acquired through positive social reinforcement. Accordingly, killing is something that we have learned is wrong.

We suggest that in their examples, Pleasants and his followers have identified, not indispensable certainties, but statements that are generally accepted as obviously true because they are repeatedly used unproblematically and reinforced to the point that it has become superfluous to make them explicit. This interpretation of Pleasants' certainties comes close to the definition of a *truism*. To make it explicit that it is wrong to kill someone non-threatening and innocent is unnecessary as everybody would agree on that; and the ascription to a person of the traits 'non-threatening' and 'innocent' implies that there are no reasons to kill or even hurt that person. However, ascriptions of 'non-threatening' and 'innocent' can be justified, debated, and doubted in each circumstance and thus are not part of the bedrock. This understanding of basic moral certainties as CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS resembling truisms does not imply that they are unquestionable and ungiveupable—however, they retain *somewhat* their function as pseudo-premises with propositional character that conveys content. They can be omitted as they would add only a proposition that everybody would agree on.

Let us illustrate this in formal terms, using the example "it is wrong to kill this child" (Hermann 2015, 94):

P_1: A child is unthreatening and innocent.
(CERTAIN PROPOSITION CP_0: Killing [an unthreatening and innocent person] is wrong.)
C: Therefore, it is wrong to kill this child.

Note that the CERTAIN PROPOSITION CP_0 can be omitted without jeopardizing the conclusion. But this is not because it is an indispensable hinge proposition, but because it functions similarly to a truism. It would be absurdly superfluous to say that killing an unthreatening and innocent person is wrong. If someone were actually to assert this out of the blue, one could justifiably counter that everybody would unproblematically agree. Thus, CP_0 is implicitly shared and in

no need of being made explicit. What one can intelligibly discuss is why a particular killing is wrong or why children are innocent and unthreatening.[12]

Accordingly, the examples provided as CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS are shared as obviously true by a moral community to the extent that it has become superfluous to make them explicit. But they can be justified or doubted. Deviating from CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS may be irrational or wrong. For instance, to kill one's dog in a state of rage is certainly an instance of wrongful killing. But, to bring one's terminally ill dog, who is palpably suffering, to the vet for euthanasia can be considered justified killing. The point is that *intelligible* reasons can be given to justify deviations from "killing is wrong."

Pleasants and his followers thus fail to appreciate all the varieties of moral certainty. They rightly point out the formal aspect of moral certainty and its criteria, but they fail to differentiate between the material and formal types of moral certainty. We contend that the proposed examples of basic moral certainties belong to the material type of moral certainty.[13] Therefore, we suggest classifying them as CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS in morality. These propositions are regress stoppers in the sense that belief in their truth is shared for good reasons. After all, there is normally no discussion among non-philosophers about the statement that killing is wrong. But much of the work is done by coming to terms with what does and does not count as justified killing. Still, CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS reflect one way of being certain in morality. What makes "killing is wrong" a CERTAIN PROPOSITION without qualifying it as bedrock in the strictest sense is the nature of CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS: they are certain only because we can give reasons why they are true (e.g., why it is wrong to kill an innocent and non-threatening person). We can offer justifications of the wrongness or rightness in question (with which many might disagree in

[12] Another interpretation of how Pleasants tries to safeguard the basic moral certainty of "killing is wrong" would be the following, which runs through circular argumentation: What seems to a basic moral certainty in "killing is wrong" is the "wrongness of (wrongful) killing." Clearly, killing is wrong and can never be right as long as it is wrongful or unjustified. Hence, on this interpretation, the attempt to rescue the non-propositional character of "killing is wrong" runs into a vicious circle. Similarly, "the rightness of justified killing" would be circular, as would "the wrongness of the infliction of unwarranted harms," which is also suggested by Pleasants (2015; see Deininger et al., 2022 for a critical discussion). We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

[13] Space restrictions preclude a detailed discussion of these examples, but we believe that our criticism applies to them as well. All examples convey content that can be negated intelligibly and thus fail to meet their formal conditions. For completeness, we shall briefly outline our criticism: Contrary to Johnson (2015) we hold that cheating is not always, but *usually*, wrong. If cheating were right, there would be no fair conditions in tests, for example. "Cheating is wrong" functions as a precondition for fairness. However, the fact that this proposition works in this way does not immunize it from doubt; instead, it allows for the justification that "cheating is wrong" should be accepted and followed by a moral community. A similar argument applies to "promises have to be kept" (Hermann, 2015, 99–100). If promises were regularly violated, cooperation and trust would eventually become impossible. Therefore, "promises have to be kept" is also far from undoubtable and can be argued for, e.g., on deontological grounds. Finally, "you should not do anything that is likely to result in your death" (Johnson, 2019, 213) is not a basic moral certainty either. There are many reasons why you might do something that results in your death, such as throwing yourself in front of a truck to save a child's life. However, all these examples share the function in morality that they *usually* do not need to be made explicit.

particular circumstances). In any case, such propositions do not function as rules of thought, but rather as content we think with. That is why they can be doubted.

In summary, we stress that like Diamond, Pleasants and his followers rightly emphasize the formal aspect of certainty. Following Wittgenstein, they rightly point out that there are certain forms of thought that, owing to their transcendental character, can be neither justified nor rejected. However, these thinkers fail to point out that moral certainty also has a material aspect, which is reflected in Pleasants' and Diamond's writings. The two writers carve out similar but still significantly different types of material certainty: CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS resemble truisms in the sense that they are generally accepted as obviously true as they are repeated so often that it has become superfluous to make them explicit. But they are also quite general when it comes to their application to concrete cases. QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS, such as "slavery is unjust and insupportable," reflect concrete moral taboos that have been achieved via a concrete rich moral history that seemingly insulates them from doubt. This characteristic brings them closer to being undoubtable. Both types of certainty represent material or propositional certainty and are capable of stopping the regress of justification. But both convey content that can be doubted. Now we shall fully flesh out what formal certainties entail.

4 Transcendental Certainties in Morality

In this section, we shall substantiate the claim that only TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES constitute bedrock *in the strictest sense*.[14] TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES describe formal conditions of rational thought. As rules of thought they include mathematical equations such as "7 + 5 = 12." Unlike the certainties discussed in Sections 2 and 3, TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES fully reflect the formal aspect of certainty. Hence, we argue that only TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES fulfill the formal criteria set out by Diamond and Pleasants (and his followers) in the preceding sections. As shown above, the characteristic of formal certainties in morality is that deviating from them would amount, in Wittgenstein's words, to the "annihilation of all yardsticks" (*OC* §492).

Our approach to TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALITY is as follows. The bedrock in its strictest form consists of "hinge propositions" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004) in the sense introduced by Wittgenstein. An important aspect of Wittgenstein's later thought is the observation that not

[14] We do not want to imply that propositional certainties are deficient in comparison to TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES by writing "in the strictest sense." All types of certainties that we discuss in this paper function as regress stoppers—but in different ways. Only TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES mark the boundary of the unintelligible (i.e., what Wittgenstein had in mind in §217 *PI*). The other types of certainty remain in the realm of the intelligible.

all propositions are propositions in the ordinary sense; some are undoubtable rules of thought (*OC* §95). These function like "hinges" (*OC* § 341) that make it possible to use other propositions. Accordingly, we consider all hinge propositions to be transcendental, something Wittgenstein himself implies (e.g., *OC* § 341). In accord with Wittgenstein, and following Moyal-Sharrock, we hold that hinge propositions are primarily characterized by being "logically indubitable, nonempirical, foundational, and nonpropositional" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 51). Like rules in mathematics, they are not empirical and "therefore not candidates for doubt, verification or falsification" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 39). These are the criteria that Diamond and Pleasants and his followers also seek to establish for their respective concepts of certainty. However, their proposed examples fail to match the description of hinge propositions as *grammatical*, non-propositional rules, deviations from which are not false but unimaginable, unthinkable, and unintelligible. We take this rule-like character to be the main aspect of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALITY that gives them their binding force. Accordingly, we shall speak of hinge propositions as grammatical rules in morality and as TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALITY.

Let us explain what we mean by describing them as transcendental. Hinge propositions are not empirical but grammatical rules. They are non-factual rules. Their function is analogous to that of a system of measurement, as William H. Brenner notes: "A system of measurement is 'transcendental': it makes measurement possible. And it is 'ideal': functioning as a measurement rather than as an object measured, it is *applied to* rather than *read off* or *inferred from* experience" (Brenner, 2005, 127; emphasis in the original). This needs to be emphasized: a system of measurement *enables* the practice of measuring. One can apply the system wrongly, but this does not affect its validity as a rule. In other words: A system of measurement is transcendental as it enables measurement but differs from the practice of measuring.

Hinge propositions as grammatical rules allow for some moves in language and prohibit others. They are different from propositions that can be true or false as grammatical rules do not possess this characteristic; rather, as Diamond explains in detail, they are "non-bipolar." According to Brenner (2005, 127), such grammatical rules include "One metre = 100 centimetres" and "~(~p) = p". Note that these rules cannot be denied as they lack a senseful negation. Try to think against either of them and to claim, for example, that ~p = p. This is not simply wrong but also unintelligible. Similarly, that one meter equals one hundred centimeters is a logical relation. Certainly, people have formerly used different systems of measurement. But this fact did not and does not count against the rule that 1 meter = 100 centimeters. Within the decimal system of measurement, this relation is logically binding and thus transcendental.

Thinking guides and the examples of basic moral certainties given by Pleasants and his followers are not certain in the manner of a grammatical rule but rather with respect to their (material) content. We think, however, that there is a promising candidate for a certainty *in morals* that is formal in nature and functions exclusively as a rule, or what we call a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY: "equals are to be treated equally." This rule qualifies as a certainty in the full sense in virtue of its characteristic of being a grammatical rule. It is a rule that has no senseful negation: thinking that equals are to be treated unequally is as unintelligible as "$\sim(\sim p) \neq p$" or "one meter = 88 centimeters." And just as a decimal system of measurement allows us to measure things, the rule "equals are to be treated equally" underlies moral thought.

Support for this argument accrues from Wittgenstein's later thought, particularly his observation that there is no dispute "over the question of whether a rule has been followed. This belongs to the scaffolding from which our language operates" (*PI* §240). It is manifest, not in shared opinions, but rather in shared judgment (cf. *PI* §§241–242). To illustrate the idea of judgment in cases of rule-based certainty, let us recall the equation "2 + 2 = 4", which Diamond uses to illustrate her account of path-indicators. Certainty, in this case, does not lie within '4' alone but rather in the move from '2 + 2' to '4,' a rule that is followed blindly (*PI* §219). This move (following the rule), and not the result '4,' is what is certain (Deininger et al., 2022). Any deviation from a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY is thought that has truly gone astray. It is neither rational nor irrational but *arational*. Consider someone insisting that 2 + 2 = 5. This conclusion is false, but the underlying rule—that 2 + 2 = 4, which makes "2 + 2 = 5" false—is certain. And with regard to the rule, "[g]iving grounds […] comes to an end" (*OC* §204), and thought that tries to do otherwise is unintelligible (see also *OC* §455). One could only repeat: "Well, 2 + 2 = 4."

To illustrate the function of hinge propositions as grammatical rules in morals, let us provide an (admittedly simplified) example that demonstrates how our proposed candidate for TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY, "equals are to be treated equally," works in reasoning. Consider Adrian, a human, who has an interest in not being physically harmed. Bente, a dog, has a *similar* interest in not being physically harmed. Let us further assume, for the sake of argument, that we take Adrian's interest in not being physically harmed to be morally relevant because he is sentient—a condition he shares with Bente. If this is so, then, *ceteris paribus*, their interest in not being physically harmed should be considered equally. To put it in formal terms:

P_1: A is not to be harmed because he is φ.

P_2: B is also φ.

(Pseudo-Premise P_0: Equals are to be treated equally.)

C: Therefore, B is not to be harmed.

Note that C follows from P_1 and P_2 without making explicit use of the pseudo-premise P_0. "Equals are to be treated equally" is a grammatical, non-propositional rule, which can be omitted without losing the derivability of this conclusion from these premises. A's and B's equal consideration in virtue of their shared φ-ness derives directly from the *rule*, which can be omitted. Whether A and B *really* count as equals according to their property of φ-ness is a different matter. We now explain this in detail.

The vast majority of traditional animal ethicists rely on this argumentative model (Monsó & Grimm, 2019, 6). It is probably most notably defended by Peter Singer (2009a, 2011), who remarks that the claim that all humans are equal is foundational not only to most moral theories but to Western thought as such (Singer, 2011, 16–19). Singer argues that, on closer examination, the characteristic of being human is not sufficient to ensure moral equality among humans in the face of the variety in human capacities—some humans are, for example, cognitively disabled to the point of not being rational, a trait that is commonly held to be a core criterion for equal moral standing (Singer, 2009b). For Singer, moral equality is not, as Alex Murphy notes, "actual descriptive equality, since humans are descriptively unequal, differing in all non-trivial properties. Thus, 'human equality' must be understood, not as a factual claim, but as the normative prescription that all humans should be *treated* equally" (Murphy, 2024, 2). Following this, Singer claims that equality is best warranted by applying "the principle of equal consideration of interests" (Singer, 2011, Chapters 2 and 3, 2009a). According to this principle, equal interests are to be considered equally in moral deliberation. To have interests requires the capacity to suffer (or sentience) (Singer, 2011, 50). And this claim entails that the equal interests of all sentient beings are to be considered equally: "an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be" (Singer, 2011, 20). Therefore, the principle dictates that all equal interests of sentient human and non-human animals are to be considered equally (and unequal interests justify unequal treatment).

It can be doubted whether equal consideration of interests is the best way of showing that humans and other animals are moral equals (e.g., Kagan, 2016). There is no certainty in equating 'equals' with equal consideration of interests. But this does not violate the transcendental rule underlying Singer's argument.

The rule "equals are to be treated equally" is transcendental in the sense that it enables intelligible justification in the form of giving and accepting reasons. However, it is devoid of

content because it functions as a rule that must be further "filled" with content. For instance, what properties φ do individuals such as A and B have to share to count as equals? "Equals are to be treated equally" leaves such *questions of content open to debate*, but it serves as an underlying rule by which we might think about equals. How foundational and important this certainty is for moral reflection is also mirrored, for instance, in debates on distributive justice. These debates rely on what Stephan Gosepath (2015) calls the "presumption of equality," which takes a rule similar to "equals are to be treated equally" as "the inevitable starting point that must be assumed" (Gosepath, 2015, 183)—an undoubtable precondition that enables judgments of equal distribution in the first place. Thus, a TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY IN MORALS represents—together with all other hinge propositions—a presupposed general basis, a framework condition for the functioning of our language games (*PI* §240; *OC* §341).

As we have shown, (QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE) CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS do not share this transcendental characteristic. They are not foundational to language games in the same way; still, they are certain to some degree. They are deeply enmeshed in our moral life, to the extent that it becomes odd to mention them explicitly, but they have content, which can be rendered plausible or implausible depending on the context and one's perspective. TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALS are devoid of content; they enable it.

This differentiation can now be substantiated in more detail. We claimed that "killing is wrong" is a proposition with content as it can be justified or doubted, as argued above. Suppose a child is playing in a nearby sandbox, displaying no aggression and causing no harm. If someone asked, with full sincerity, "Do you think it is right to kill that child?", you would be within your rights to dismiss the question as needing no further discussion. However, you *could* substantiate your dismissal with reasons. The oddness of making "killing is wrong" explicit derives from the fact that, as with a truism, it is accepted as so obviously true that discussing it is irritatingly superfluous in most circumstances. This makes "killing is wrong" *somewhat* foundational to language use. Still, there is no transcendental element in "killing is wrong."

At first glance, "Equal interests are to be considered equally" might also appear to be a proposition with content. But it is not. Granted, content was invoked above when this rule was linked to the idea that it is interests that are to be treated equally in moral consideration. This application may suggest that the rule conveys content. However, the rule does not attribute actual or descriptive equality to a particular case. It does not say, for example, that all humans are created equally. It merely states that if A and B are equals and A is treated in such and such a way, then B is to be treated equally in such and such a way. "A and B are equals" does the

work. The rule provides the basis for further justification, but it gives no account of moral equality, political equality, gender equality, etc. So, again, the sense in which individuals are equals (regarding their humanity, interests, inherent value, dignity, etc.) is not set in advance and may remain an open question. In practical terms, consider again this claim à la Singer: "This animal's interest in avoiding harm and your interest in avoiding harm are equally strong; therefore, your interests are to be considered equally." One can now come up with reasons why the interests in question are not equally strong or why humans and animals are different in kind, rendering their interests incommensurable. But these objections apply, not to the underlying rule, *but to the application of the rule*. If there were (contrary to fact) agreement that the interests in question are equally strong, then nobody would doubt that they are to be considered equally.

Thus, TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES function as hinge propositions in the sense of grammatical rules. Violating such rules comes at the cost of intelligibility. In this way, they are unlike (QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE) CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS, whose negations can be rational (or right) or irrational (or wrong). TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES come *without content*. However, they can have practical implications in judgments within a given practical context. For example, "7 + 3 = 10" becomes practically relevant when you lend your friend three euros on Tuesday and seven euros on Thursday and expect to be repaid in full on Monday. This is important with regard to the question of which logical relations and TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES share similarities with the account of morality offered here.

TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALITY stop the regress of a chain of justificatory reasons by providing a "bedrock" for reasoning in its strictest sense (*PI* §217; *OC* §248). We can debate the reasons why someone may appropriately be treated unequally, but such a debate is not about the basic rule; in fact, it builds on that rule.

In summary, grammatical rules, such as the rule that equals are to be treated equally as well as rules of measurement and logical rules, function in a non-bipolar way to enable thinking. They are foundational to thinking. With regard to applying the rule "equals are to be treated equally" to the world, uncertainty remains over who or what counts as equal. When these considerations are made explicit, the implicit transcendental character of such certainties also becomes explicit. Certainty in this sense lies in tacitly following rules of thought; and certainty is not the result of such thought (*PI* §241). Such grammatical rules precede our language uses but show in our practices. This is an important way in which the present use of 'transcendental' differs from a Kantian use of the term.

It is important to emphasize that TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES must be meaningfully applied. To say, for instance, that animal and human sentience should be considered equally would be to value a certain shared characteristic as something that is equally important across different groups, regardless of the differences between them (e.g., between human and non-human animals or even between humans and other humans). Again, a question remains as to whether individuals or entities that are taken to be similar in a given way should be taken to be significantly similar in terms of moral thinking. This question is to be answered in moral debates under the guidance of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES. Only the latter can truly not be doubted. This is because they are part of the bedrock, the ground on which intelligible argumentation takes place. In brief: we do find certainty in the transcendental foundation of our thinking, but not in the empirical world, where these rules are brought into contact with content.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on certainties in morals in two ways: first, to systematize the variety of certainties, and second, to develop the category of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES. We have affirmed the existence of certainties in morals and the view that certainties function as regress stoppers by stopping the asking and giving of reasons in the way that Wittgenstein described as reaching bedrock. However, certainty in morality has two aspects: a material and a formal one. All extant accounts discussed in this paper point to this distinction but fail to recognize it in practice in the examples they provide. The systematization developed here shows that there are propositional and non-propositional certainties in morals. Material, or propositional, certainties (i.e., QUASI-UNDOUBTABLE CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS and CERTAIN PROPOSITIONS) are certain to the extent that they are manifest in most people's beliefs and usually need not be made explicit. And this is desirable; a moral community in which the injustice of slavery or the wrongness of killing does not have to be renegotiated tends to be a society that enables worthwhile living more effectively than a community lacking these certainties. Still, as we have seen, these certainties are not indubitable.

The formal aspect of certainty, which is identified by all the philosophers discussed above and implied by Wittgenstein himself, is reflected only in hinge propositions, which serve as grammatical rules and encompass TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES IN MORALS. These are non-bipolar and non-propositional. There may well be more TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTIES in morals than the one rule identified above. We think, however, that "equals are to be treated equally" is a promising candidate given that equality, together with equal consideration, plays such a fundamental role as an undoubtable presupposition in many influential moral theories.

We offer it as a convincing example to illustrate and give substance to the category of TRANSCENDENTAL CERTAINTY in morality.

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