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## ***Problems in Pleasants' Wittgensteinian Idea of Basic Moral Certainties***

### **Abstract**

Pleasants (2008b, 2009, 2015) argues in favour of the idea of basic moral certainties. Analogous to Wittgenstein's (1975) basic empirical certainties, basic moral certainties are universal certainties that cannot be justified, asserted or meaningfully doubted. They are a fundamental condition of morality as such, thus allowing us to carry out other moral operations. Brice (2013) and Rummens (2013) have criticized Pleasants' proposal, arguing that basic moral certainties are significantly disanalogous to Wittgenstein's basic empirical certainties. Brice argues that Pleasants does not differentiate between a bottom-up and a top-down approach to basic certainties nor does he acknowledge the difference that this distinction constitutes in the foundational role of a certainty. Meanwhile, Rummens claims that basic moral certainties are not universal. Conversely, they are moral hinges embedded in certain culturally and historically specific moral language-games. Pleasants (2015) has provided a response to these criticisms, whilst defending the universality and naturalism of basic moral certainties. In this paper, first, I single out the problems in Pleasants' response to the criticisms introduced by Brice and Rummens. On the one hand, I will argue that Pleasants must present further arguments in order to demonstrate that basic moral certainties are analogous to basic empirical certainties. On the other hand, I will argue that the existence of basic moral certainties that coalesce with numerous exceptions and suspensions generates significant problems in Pleasants' proposal. Second, I advance two cases regarding euthanasia that meaningfully challenge and doubt Pleasants' central basic moral certainty: the wrongness of killing innocent human beings. Additionally, both cases are employed to meaningfully doubt and challenge Pleasants' basic moral certainty of the badness of death.

### **Key Words**

Basic moral certainties; Pleasants; Wittgenstein; euthanasia; killing; ethics.

### **I. Introduction**

In a series of papers Pleasants (2008b, 2009, 2015) extended Wittgenstein's (1975) observations on the phenomenon of basic empirical certainties in order to set forth the idea of basic moral certainties. These basic moral certainties play a foundational role in, and constitute the basis of, our moral practices. Brice (2013) and Rummens (2013) have criticized Pleasants' idea of basic moral certainties due to the inexistence of a full parallel between basic moral certainties and basic empirical certainties. Against these criticisms Pleasants (2015) has provided a response whereby he reiterates the idea of basic moral certainties by seeking to bring out the universality and naturalism of these certainties. In this paper I aim to indicate the problems in Pleasants' response and advance two meaningful doubts concerning his central basic moral certainty: the wrongness of killing innocent human beings (hereafter, wrongness of killing). Section II of this paper characterizes Pleasants' idea of basic moral certainties. Sections III and IV outline Brice's and Rummens' criticisms of basic moral certainties. Section V introduces Pleasants' response to these criticisms and, concurrently, singles out the problems in this response. Finally, section VI advances two cases regarding euthanasia that attempt to meaningfully challenge and doubt Pleasants' central basic moral certainty: the wrongness of killing. Additionally, both cases will be reconsidered in order to attempt to meaningfully challenge and doubt Pleasants' basic moral certainty of the badness of death.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Basic Moral Certainties**

The idea of basic moral certainties developed and defended by Pleasants stems from Wittgenstein's (1975) observations on basic certainties.<sup>2</sup> Pleasants, following Moyal-Sharrock (2005, 78), affirms that a 'basic certainty' "is something that cannot be sensefully asserted, explained, justified, questioned, or denied first-personally; and indeed no-one would even think of doing so outside of a philosophical debate on the phenomenon" (Pleasants 2015, 200). Basic certainties are immune to questioning, doubt or testing: they cannot be verified, affirmed nor justified resorting to evidence. As a consequence of having an attitude of basic certainty towards certain state of affairs we are able to perform various epistemic operations (e.g. discovering, justifying, verifying, etc.).

Consider the following basic certainty analysed by Rummens (2013, 130-132): if I see a piano, then it exists. This basic certainty allows us to perform certain epistemic operations. For instance, two individuals (*A* and *B*) have competing views: *A* has the belief "There is a piano in the next room" and *B* has the belief "There is not a piano in the next room". Upon entering the aforementioned room, our observation in conjunction with this basic empirical certainty will provide the basis to justify and verify the belief of either *A* or *B*.

Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* focused on basic empirical certainties. Pleasants extrapolates and extends this proposal in order to advance his idea of basic moral certainties.

Parallel to basic certainties, basic moral certainties cannot be verified, justified nor meaningfully doubted. They are certainties universally held by all rational individuals, regardless of the specific cultural or historical moral language-game to which they pertain (Pleasants 2015, 199, 205, 207). *Ergo*, basic moral certainties play “the same kind of foundational role in our moral practices and judgements as basic empirical certainty does in our epistemic practices and judgements” (Pleasants 2009, 669). As a consequence of having an attitude of basic moral certainty we are able to perform other moral operations (e.g. judgments, reflections, etc.).

Pleasants (2008b, 255-264; 2009, 672-679; 2015, 199) mainly sets forth two central examples of basic moral certainties that are internally related: the wrongness of killing and, by extension, the badness of death.<sup>3</sup> That it is wrong to kill and that death is bad “is so fundamental to our human form of life and individual moral consciousness as to be recalcitrant to propositional formulation” (Pleasants 2015, 200). Pleasants provides a practical test that any candidate to basic moral certainty status must comply with. This test is based on the operations performed by Wittgenstein on Moore’s (1939; 1993) examples. “Imagine that someone asked you if you thought it wrong (absent special excusing or justifying circumstances) to kill people, and if you do, on what basis, for which reason, and what it is that makes killing people wrong” (Pleasants 2015, 200)

A series of deprecation explanations have been purported in order to explain the reasons that make killing people wrong (see Young 1979; Levenbook 1984; Marquis 1997; DeGrazia 2013; McMahan 2013; Miller 2013; Sinnott-Armstrong 2013; Soto 2013). However, these explanations are peculiar: they are not false, but they do not capture the gravity of the wrongness of killing. These explanations “typically elicit a mirthful reaction [...]. I take it that the mirth evinced is the result of having one’s basic moral certainty agitated” (Pleasants 2015, 202).

In sum, the test of certainty is reduced to questioning if the wrongness of the action described can be sensefully asserted, explained or doubted (Pleasants 2015, 202).<sup>4</sup> The wrongness of killing cannot be sensefully asserted, explained or doubted, as evidenced by the peculiarity of the deprecation explanations. *Ergo*, the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty that serves as a fundamental condition of morality as such. It is a universal basic moral certainty held by all rational individuals and it cannot be meaningfully challenged or doubted (Pleasants 2009, 671-672; 2015, 202).

### **III. What kind of basic moral certainty?**

Brice has criticized Pleasants’ proposal arguing that basic moral certainties and Wittgenstein’s basic empirical certainties are disanalogous. Brice differentiates “a bottom-up approach, where

certainty is part of our natural and instinctual predisposition, and a top-down approach, where certainty is acquired through positive reinforcement by family and culture” (2013, 480). Whilst the former is closely intertwined with basic empirical certainties, the latter refers to propositions that may arrive at a level of certitude demonstrated in our unreflective behaviour (Brice 2013, 479). Pleasants claims that basic moral certainties are analogous to basic empirical certainties and, therefore, can play the same foundational role. Namely, basic moral certainties must correspond to a bottom-up approach: they must be part of our natural, instinctual biology.

However, this approach to basic moral certainties seems implausible since “our comprehension of concepts like innocent and person only make sense (only take on meaning) within a form of life” (Brice 2013, 479-480). There is nothing universally obvious about Pleasants’ basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. “Although this seems obvious to those of us who reside in this particular form of life, there are others, however, who do not think this” (Brice 2013, 486). The wrongness of killing is merely an item of moral knowledge that is learned within our particular form of life (Brice 2013, 483, 485).

It follows from the above that basic moral certainties pertain to a top-down approach: they are moral certainties relativized to particular moral language-games. In principle, pertaining to a top-down approach does not negate that basic moral certainties can play some kind of foundational role, albeit it is evident that they cannot play the same kind of foundational role as basic empirical certainties. “Our moral convictions may slowly become certain, having been acquired quite differently than our empirical certainty” (Brice 2013, 479).

#### **IV. A relativistic threat**

Rummens argues that Pleasants’ extrapolation of basic moral certainties from Wittgenstein’s basic empirical certainties incurs in certain inadequacies. Basic moral certainties, in accordance with Wittgenstein’s characterization of basic empirical certainties, must comply with seven characteristics:

- 1 Basic moral certainties cannot be meaningfully doubted.
- 2 Basic moral certainties cannot be justified.
- 3 Basic moral certainties are certainties of our acting.
- 4 Doubt regarding basic moral certainties is a form of insanity.
- 5 Basic moral certainties are the preconditions of local moral doubt.
- 6 Basic moral certainties form a (moral) system.
- 7 Basic moral certainties are not necessarily certain. (Rummens 2013, 134-5)

Whilst these seven characteristics seem to appear, explicitly or implicitly, in Pleasants' work, he focuses heavily on 2 –especially when he analyses the devaluation explanations of the wrongness of killing. Nevertheless, Pleasants fails to explain 1: why the wrongness of killing cannot be doubted. “He just briefly suggests that these certainties have an ‘existential status’ and that they are ‘manifest in how we live and conduct ourselves’” (Rummens 2013, 136).

To illustrate the insufficiencies in Pleasants' proposal, Rummens (2013, 136-137) demonstrates that we can employ the same arguments introduced by Pleasants to defend his idea of basic moral certainties in order to argue in favour of basic religious certainties, such as “God exists”. However, if an individual meaningfully doubted or challenged this basic religious certainty we would not label him as irrational or insane. We would just state that he has different religious beliefs. This parallel with religion

conjures up the relativistic picture of a series of competing language games, each with their own set of “basic certainties.” The possible existence of such a plurality of language games in the moral domain would be deeply problematic for our purposes because it would undermine the Wittgensteinian argument against skepticism claiming that the skeptic has no language game in which to meaningfully raise her doubts. (Rummens 2013, 137)

It follows from the above that Pleasants' arguments do not consider nor provide any response to a relativistic threat. Consequently it is unclear whether basic moral certainties are universal certainties or if they are relativized to some historically and culturally specific moral language-games.<sup>5</sup>

To analyse this relativistic threat Rummens (2013, 141) introduces a distinction between ‘basic certainties’, in reference to basic certainties *simpliciter*, and ‘hinges of a language game L’, in reference to certainties that are relativized to a language game L. Pleasants must demonstrate that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty that cannot be meaningfully doubted from within any moral language-game.

Rummens (2013, 141-143) argues that an extrapolation of Wittgenstein's grammatical analysis of basic certainties is a two-step process. In the first place, it is necessary to determine if our specific moral language-game possesses any moral hinges that comply with the following seven characteristics:

- 1 Moral hinges cannot be meaningfully doubted within *M*.
- 2 Moral hinges cannot be justified within *M*.
- 3 Moral hinges are certainties of our acting as members of a community committed to *M*.
- 4 Doubt regarding moral hinges is a form of incompetence regarding *M*.
- 5 Moral hinges are the preconditions of doubt within the framework of *M*.
- 6 Moral hinges form the system *M*.

The existence of moral hinges within a moral language-game is not a far-fetched claim (see Rummens 2013, 142; Kober 1997; Harre 2010). Furthermore, Pleasants, at the very least, conceives the wrongness of killing as a moral hinge within our moral language-game. However, “we would need to go further and establish that the moral hinges in our moral language game could also be considered to be basic moral certainties with the characteristics already mentioned” (Rummens 2013, 142). This leads to the second step: we must demonstrate that a specific moral hinge also fulfils the seven characteristics associated to basic moral certainties. Namely, we must establish that it cannot be challenged from within any moral language-game, thus providing a Wittgensteinian argument against moral scepticism.

Rummens (2013, 144) contends that Pleasants does not comply with this two-step process and, therefore, does not overcome the relativistic threat nor does he reject moral scepticism. Specifically, Rummens claims that Pleasants does not fulfil the second step. It is uncertain how rational human beings that pertained to other moral language-games maintained the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. For instance, this certainty was not present during the Nazi Holocaust, in the slave-trading and slave-owning societies or in the Mayan culture when they carried out large-scale human sacrifices due to religious and mythical beliefs (Rummens 2013, 135, 144). Consequently the wrongness of killing is only a moral hinge relativized to specific moral language-games. There is no full parallel between basic moral certainties and basic empirical certainties. The recalcitrant physicality of the objects of empirical certainty is not comparable to the voluntariness of the norms that prohibit the killing of innocent human beings. For example, a murderer is physically capable of violating the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong, however “it makes no sense at all to say that somebody who believes that human beings do not have wings can, in spite of that belief, still jump out of the window and simply fly off” (Rummens 2013, 144).

## **V. Problems in Pleasants’ response**

Pleasants (2015) has argued against Brice's and Rummens’ criticisms, whilst defending the universality and naturalism of basic moral certainties. Throughout this section, first, I will outline Pleasants’ response. Second, I will argue that Pleasants fails to fully reject Brice’s and Rummens’ criticisms. Finally, I will argue that the existence of basic moral certainties that coalesce with numerous exceptions and suspensions generates significant problems in Pleasants’ proposal.

### **V.1. Pleasants’ response**

Pleasants' response is structured into three different sections. In the first place, he deals with Rummens' (2013, 136) claim that there is no full parallel between the empirical realm and the moral realm. Pleasants contends, on the one hand, that both the murderer and the would-be flier would receive negative sanctions upon such acts. Basic moral certainties are about what one should and should not do, not about what one can and cannot do (Pleasants 2015, 203-204). Being able to kill does not exclude the certainty that killing is wrong. The murderer, if rational and sane, would not abandon the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong and he would admit that the action he has carried out is morally wrong. On the other hand, Pleasants (2015, 204) argues, against Rummens, that empirical certainties do not impose themselves with an irresistible force. Many of our basic empirical certainties are based on social belief and, therefore, their forcefulness is normative. Consequently any differences between the objects of basic empirical certainty and basic moral certainty "do not amount to a relevant difference between the respective states of *certainty* itself" (Pleasants 2015, 204).

In the second place, Pleasants deals with the possible relativistic threat introduced by Rummens and Brice. Despite the striking differences between divergent historical and cultural moral language-games, Pleasants (2015, 205) argues that there are still universal basic moral certainties. To demonstrate that the wrongness of killing is a universal basic moral certainty, and not a moral hinge relativized to certain language-games, he must deal with the "tricky fact of there being many places and times where a whole society is complicit in practices that inflict death and other modes of suffering on people we (now) regard as wholly innocent, undeserving victims" (Pleasants 2015, 205). Pleasants' answer can be outlined thus.

Initially, he introduces a series of examples that do not invoke cultural nor historical variability, e.g. the killing of innocent civilians carried out by our governments' military forces (Pleasants 2015, 206). Initially this example appears to meaningfully doubt the universal basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. However, Pleasants argues that our basic moral certainty "coalesces with the socially acquired belief that it is sometimes permissible, and sometimes even required, to kill and inflict pain on innocents, when apparently weighty reasons support or demand doing so" (2015, 206). These exceptions do not meaningfully doubt our basic moral certainty.

According to Pleasants we have not reached a certain degree of moral certainty regarding the wrongness of killing that is not present in other moral language-games, as Rummens and Brice suggest. The government killings described are not substantially different from two extreme episodes that, apparently, violate the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong: the society of Nazi Germany and the slave-trading/slave-owning societies (Pleasants 2015, 207-208). These societies, as ours, possess the universal basic moral certainty that killing is wrong, "it is just that their citizens very quickly learned to admit far more exceptions to it

than normal modern societies allow” (Pleasants 2015, 207-208). The individuals of these societies that participated, directly or indirectly, in the killings “learned to withdraw that certainty from whole kinds of people who came to be re-categorised as dangerously threatening non-persons” (Pleasants 2015, 208).<sup>6</sup>

Our society, the society of Nazi Germany and slave-trading/slave-owning societies all possess the universal basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. This certainty is “akin to an innate disposition (whether it is actually biologically generated, or a ‘cultural universal’ that derives from social membership as such, I would not like to say)” (Pleasants 2015, 210). Namely, basic moral certainties pertain to a bottom-up approach where certainty is part of our natural and instinctual predisposition. What is learned (against Brice) and culturally/historically variable (against Rummens) “are the discourses, language-games, and mechanisms of mediation and distantiation through which people come to accept *exceptions* to, and *suspensions* of, their basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing” (Pleasants 2015, 210).

Individuals that pertain to these societies may exhibit, in Haskell’s (1998) terminology, ‘passive sympathy’ for the victims of the killings described. Nevertheless, this does not necessitate that the basic moral certainty is abandoned nor that these institutionalized practices are morally wrong; rather they “can still appear to be just (or not unjust) to their hosts, because the practices are considered to be necessary and in some cases their victims lacking entitlement to the full moral status enjoyed by those whose interests the practices serve” (Pleasants 2015, 209).<sup>7</sup>

In sum, to reject the relativistic threat Pleasants demonstrates that there is no significant difference between our predecessors and us regarding the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. All possible exceptions are regarded either as necessary practices or, alternatively, they are carried out with regards to individuals that do not fall under the scope of ‘innocent human beings’.

In the third place, and finally, Pleasants deals with a possible issue that stems from the answer he has been developing. “Given all the exceptions (both in our own and other people’s society) to it being wrong to kill innocent and non-threatening people, it is simply not true that people invariably hold the wrongness of killing as a basic moral certainty” (Pleasants 2015, 210). For instance, not even pacifists believe that all types of killing are wrong (e.g. killing foetuses or chronically suffering patients in acts of voluntary euthanasia). Moreover, conversely to the exceptions considered previously, these latter cases describe killings of individuals who are conceived as innocent human beings. Therefore Pleasants encounters the following possible objection: the list of exceptions is so long that the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong suffers the death of a thousand qualifications.

Pleasants’ answer to this objection is twofold. First, he claims that “being unsure about outlying or unusual cases and the scope of a concept need not destroy one’s confidence in



perceiving and judging usual and paradigmatic cases” (Pleasants 2015, 211). Knowing the exact range of basic moral certainties is not a central issue. It is only necessary to know if “we *can* be morally certain about something that admits as many exceptions as the wrongness of killing seemingly does” (Pleasants 2015, 211). Second, Pleasants (2015, 211) argues that many of the apparent exceptions are not really exceptions since the killings are merely the choice of the lesser of two evils, thus contributing to a greater good (e.g. saving more innocent human beings).

Nevertheless, a further objection can be interposed against Pleasants: how can we hold the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing when we allow, collude or participate in so many practices that cause the death of innocent people? Pleasants (2015, 211-212) argues that there is no contradiction or incoherence in both having this basic moral certainty and allowing for exceptions to be permissible in certain instances. “It remains the case that the vast majority of people, *in normal circumstances*, eschew and abhor personal participation in it” (Pleasants 2015, 212). This act of abhorrence has a cognitive process that is radically distinct from the cognitive process inherent in the judgment that a killing is justified, thus demonstrating the basicness of the basic moral certainty (Cushman, et al. 2012; Pleasants 2015, 212).

The issue underlining the objections considered stems from the philosophers’ tendency to sublimate the concept of ‘moral reasons’ and present it as having irresistible force (Pleasants 2015, 212). Whilst moral reasons for acting are powerful, they do not have an irresistible force. Humans are occasionally weak and self-interested, albeit this does not negate the existence of basic moral certainties.

Consequently “so long as one does not participate at all directly in killing, one’s basic moral certainty that killing is wrong is undisturbed by all those exceptions of which one may be only dimly aware” (Pleasants 2015, 213). Furthermore, the various exceptions presented are institutionalized practices: they are organized in such a way that it is hard for individuals to perceive the wrongdoings or their complicity in it (Pleasants 2008a; 2015, 213). Nonetheless, even if an individual does see through the shield of institutionalized practices and fails to act against the suffering of innocent human beings, he “continues to be certain of the moral wrongness of killing while regretting one’s socially structured complicity in it” (Pleasants 2015, 212).

## V.2. Problems in Pleasants’ response to Brice’s and Rummens’ criticisms

It is possible to single out two main problems in Pleasants’ attempt to argue against Brice’s and Rummens’ criticisms. First, the exceptions introduced by Rummens and analysed by Pleasants regarding Nazi Germany and the slave trade are not, strictly speaking, exceptions to the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. Any legitimate exception to this basic moral certainty must

describe the killing of an innocent human being that is not deemed morally wrong by a rational individual. The pseudo-exceptions analysed by Pleasants only exemplify cases where individuals are not conceived as human beings, as innocent or as both. *Ergo*, they are not legitimate exceptions that meaningfully challenge Pleasants' basic moral certainty.

Due to this (mis)use of the notion of 'exception', Pleasants only partially rejects the relativistic threat introduced by Brice and Rummens. He dismisses possible pseudo-exceptions due to their inadequacy in meaningfully challenging the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. However, Pleasants does not consider the possibility of meaningful doubts (see sections V.3 and VI) nor does he take notice of the two-step process introduced by Rummens. Consequently Pleasants does not fully overcome the relativistic threat nor does he justify why basic moral certainties are not moral hinges of specific language-games. For instance, he does not provide an explanation for the case introduced by Rummens concerning the killings carried out in the Mayan culture (where the individuals who are killed seem to be recognised as innocent human beings) nor does he demonstrate that the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong exists within this specific moral language-game.

Second, Pleasants (2015, 210), against Brice, makes a substantial claim regarding the nature of basic moral certainties: they are akin to innate dispositions. This claim is necessary in order to avoid associating basic moral certainties to a top-down approach, where the level of certainty is only attained by family or cultural reinforcement –thus introducing a relativistic threat. However, Pleasants does not introduce any arguments to sustain the claim that basic moral certainties are akin to innate dispositions. His uncertainty regarding whether these innate dispositions are biological or cultural universals further accentuates the fact that no arguments have been provided to sustain this understanding. Moreover, Pleasants must clarify how a cultural universal can be conceived as an innate disposition. It follows from the above that Pleasants does not demonstrate that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty that pertains to a bottom-up approach. *Ergo*, he does not overcome the relativistic threat.

Additionally, Pleasants (2015, 197, 199) explicitly states that he aims to argue in favour of the naturalism of basic moral certainties –an aspect that he does not seem to cover explicitly in his work. The possibility of conceiving basic moral certainties as biologically innate dispositions appears to be an adequate instance to argue in favour of the naturalism of these certainties, since it is unclear how a naturalistic defence of basic moral certainties could be sustained whilst conceiving them as cultural universals.

The two main problems outlined suggest that Pleasants does not successfully argue against the criticisms introduced by Brice and Rummens: it is still unclear if basic moral certainties are analogous to basic empirical certainties. Arguments are still required in order to fully demonstrate (against Rummens) that basic moral certainties are not just moral hinges and (against Brice) that basic moral certainties pertain to a bottom-up approach to certainties.

### V.3. Further problems in Pleasants' response

There are three further problems in Pleasants' response that exceed the criticisms introduced by Rummens and Brice. These problems stem from the answer provided by Pleasants in order to argue against the apparent contradiction of defending the existence of a universal basic moral certainty whilst admitting numerous exceptions.

First, being unsure about the scope of a basic moral certainty does partially affect its legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> The exact range of a basic moral certainty, in normal circumstances, is specified by the certainty itself: all those cases where an individual that is conceived as an innocent human being is killed must be regarded as morally wrong.<sup>9</sup> I accept Pleasants' (2015, 211) claim that being unsure about unusual cases does not destroy our basic moral certainties. For instance, we may be uncertain if a specific individual is an innocent human being or not. Nonetheless, once the status of this individual has been clarified no further doubt is possible or legitimate: if the individual is an innocent human being we must regard the killing as morally wrong as a consequence of our basic moral certainty. Any further doubt meaningfully challenges the legitimacy of the basic moral certainty at issue.

For instance, reconsider the basic empirical certainty that if we see a piano then it exists. This basic certainty defines its own scope: if, in normal circumstances, we can state that we can see a piano, then it must exist. We might be uncertain if there is a piano in the next room. Nonetheless, upon entering the aforementioned room and seeing the piano no further doubt is possible or legitimate with regards to this basic empirical certainty.

Second, Pleasants argues that several exceptions (e.g. the killings carried out by our governments' military forces) are not, strictly speaking, exceptions since they are the choice of the lesser of two evils or contribute to a greater good. However, this is irrelevant if the killings are not perceived as morally wrong. Coincidentally Pleasants (2015, 209) admits that certain exceptions that he describes (e.g. the killings carried out by our governments' military forces) are not perceived as unjust or morally wrong.

Third, Pleasants' attempts to explain how we can hold the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing when we allow, collude or participate in so many practices that cause the deaths of innocent people. Pleasants (2015, 212) argues that people generally abhor and eschew participation. Even if we assume that this response is correct, it does not provide an explanation for those instances where individuals cannot eschew participation. For instance, the killings carried out by our governments' military forces involve the participation of certain individuals – they are not actions carried out by non-human entities.

Consequently Pleasants must demonstrate, parallel to the case of the murder considered above, that the individuals who participate in these killings conceive their actions as morally

wrong and that they do not abandon their basic moral certainty. Nevertheless, he explicitly states that institutionalized practices “through which death, suffering and incarceration is inflicted on innocent and non-threatening beings can still appear to be just (or not unjust) to their hosts” (Pleasants 2015, 209). Moreover, Pleasants (2015, 209) claims that these institutionalized practices are not necessarily morally wrong.

Therefore, the individuals who kill innocent human beings for our governments may not perceive their actions as unjust or morally wrong. *Ergo*, we have described the killing of innocent human beings that does not result in negative moral evaluation by the killers or the society they pertain to. This meaningfully doubts the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong. It is contradictory to sustain the wrongness of killing as a basic moral certainty whilst claiming that the killings carried out by our governments’ military forces are not perceived as unjust or morally wrong by the participants in said killings.

## **VI. Two cases regarding euthanasia**

In this section I will introduce two cases that deal with euthanasia in order to meaningfully doubt and argue against conceiving the wrongness of killing (and, by extension, the badness of death) as a universal basic moral certainty. In order to meaningfully doubt Pleasants’ basic moral certainty these cases must fulfil three basic conditions.<sup>10</sup>

First, the individual who kills the innocent human being must directly participate in the act of killing and s/he must kill an individual that s/he, and other individuals that pertain to the same moral language-game, recognise as an innocent human being. If the individual killed is conceived as an innocent human being, the killer (and any observer who pertain to the same moral language-game) must regard the killing as morally wrong. Second, the proposed case cannot be a local doubt. Local doubts are questions that we can raise that “depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (Wittgenstein 1975, §341). Thus local doubts cannot meaningfully doubt basic certainties due to the fact that basic certainties are the preconditions for local doubts. Third, the case must rationally demonstrate that the killer, or any other rational being who pertain to the same moral language-game, does not regard the killing of the innocent human being as morally wrong. Thus demonstrating that the wrongness of killing is not a basic moral certainty within certain moral language-games.

Consider (1)-(2):

- (1) A human being *C* kills an innocent human being *D* through the practice of euthanasia.
- (2) A human being *C* murders an innocent human being *D* through the practice of euthanasia in a country where euthanasia is not legalized.

Both cases must comply with the three specified conditions in order to possibly meaningfully doubt Pleasants' basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing.

To fulfil the first condition it is necessary to determine that the individual who is killed (i.e. *D*) is conceived as an innocent human being and that the notion of 'kill' can be applied to the act of euthanasia –i.e. that *C* actually kills *D*. Consequently, I maintain the following commitments in the analysis of (1) and (2):

(i) *C* is a qualified physician and *D* fulfils the five conditions for euthanasia described by Young. Namely, euthanasia can be carried out *iff* a person “(a) is suffering from a terminal illness; (b) is unlikely to benefit from the discovery of a cure for that illness during what remains of her life expectancy; (c) is, as a direct result of the illness, either suffering intolerable pain, or only has available a life that is unacceptably burdensome [...] (d) has an enduring, voluntary and competent wish to die (or has, prior to losing the competence to do so, expressed a wish to be assisted to die in the event that conditions (a)-(c) are satisfied); and (e) is unable without assistance to end her life” (Young 2017).

(ii) *D* is conceived as an innocent human being. This is not a farfetched claim since physicians and other rational human beings conceive numerous individuals that are killed through the practice of euthanasia as innocent human beings.

(iii) 'Kill' is generally defined thus: to deprive of life or to cause death (Kill 2018). Within this basic definition of 'kill' it would be possible to introduce the following meaningful doubt: *C* and *D* are colleagues (and innocent human beings) that have gone rock climbing. In an unfortunate movement *C* breaks some of the ropes and equipment that *D* was utilizing, *D* falls and dies. Thus *C* kills an innocent human being. However, this does not necessarily entail that *C* is an immoral individual or that the killing of *D* is morally wrong. *Ergo*, we have described a killing of an innocent human being that does not result in negative moral evaluation. Nevertheless, it might be objected that we cannot hold *C* accountable, from a moral standpoint, for his actions since it was an accident. To avoid this objection 'kill' is redefined thus: to intentionally deprive of life or intentionally cause death.

(iv) Euthanasia is conceived as the killing of a human being –as Pleasants (2015, 211) explicitly admits. Two definitions can be employed to further sustain this understanding. First, euthanasia is the act an individual carries out when “she brings about the death of another person because she believes the latter's present existence is so bad that he would be better off dead, or believes that unless she intervenes and ends his life, his life will become so bad that he would be better off dead” (Young 2017). Conceiving euthanasia as the lesser of two evils is irrelevant if the action carried out is not conceived as morally wrong (see section V.3). Second, the Merriam-Webster medical dictionary defines euthanasia as “the act or practice of causing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (such as persons or domestic

animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy—called also *mercy killing*” (Euthanasia 2018). Both definitions entail intentionally causing death to an innocent human being, thus complying with the definition outlined in (iii).

(v) In order to reaffirm that *C* kills *D* I will only consider the Dutch model of euthanasia or any equivalent. Namely, the physician actually administers the medication to kill the patient. The physician cannot eschew participation in the killing and, by extension, it cannot be claimed that her/his “basic moral certainty that killing is wrong is undisturbed” (Pleasants 2015, 213). The importance of analysing this model is due to the fact that in other cases, such as the Oregon model, a physician can prescribe medication so the patient can self-administer it and kill him or herself.

It follows from (i)-(v) that *C* understands that s/he is intentionally killing an innocent human being. *Ergo*, in accordance with Pleasants’ basic moral certainty, this killing must be regarded as morally wrong.

In order to fulfil the second condition, (1) and (2) must not be local doubts. Local doubts generally involve local moral questions that can “only be meaningfully raised against a background of unproblematic moral assumptions shared by all parties” (Rummens 2013, 135). They do not meaningfully doubt or challenge basic moral certainties. For instance, two individuals (*A* and *B*) are uncertain if a specific killing is morally wrong or not since it is unclear if the individual killed is an innocent human being or not. In other words, *A* and *B* have the basic moral certainty that killing is morally wrong and they express the following local doubt: is this specific killing morally wrong or not? *A* believes that the individual killed is an innocent human being and, hence, that the killing is morally wrong and *B* believes the contrary (i.e. that the individual killed is not an innocent human being and, hence, the killing is not morally wrong). It is later determined that the individual was an innocent human being, thus justifying the moral belief of *A* and eliminating the existing local doubt. Once the status of the individual is clarified no further doubt is possible, as this kind of local doubt requires the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing as a precondition.

However, I have already stipulated that the practice of euthanasia involves a physician that kills an innocent human being, thus necessitating negative moral evaluation. It is not analogous to a local doubt that questions the scope of the notions ‘kill’ or ‘innocent human being’. Consequently, if (1) and (2) fulfil the third condition specified (i.e. they do not necessitate negative moral evaluation) they can meaningfully challenge and doubt the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong.

Having established that (1) and (2) fulfil the first and second condition, I will now turn to the third condition and determine if both cases can rationally meaningfully doubt Pleasants’ basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing. Consider (1):

(1) A human being *C* kills an innocent human being *D* through the practice of euthanasia.

Despite the fact that *C* kills *D* there is no moral certainty regarding the wrongness of the action carried out by *C*. Numerous countries have legalized euthanasia (see Griffiths et. al. 2008; Lewis 2007) and it is a widespread view among the societies of these countries that the actions carried out by *C* are neither morally wrong nor reprehensible. Furthermore, academic works (see Young 2007; Varelius 2007; 2014) argue in favour of euthanasia both legally and morally – Varelius even extends the permissibility of euthanasia due to existential suffering. It follows from the above that rational arguments have been provided to argue in favour of the morality of killing an innocent human being –thus complying with the third condition described.

I am not denying the existence of numerous individuals and academics (see Gorsuch 2006; Summer 2011) who argue that euthanasia is morally wrong, resorting to sanctity of life or the ‘slippery road’ argument.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the existence of rational individuals who do not regard (1) as morally wrong demonstrates that the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong can be meaningfully doubted. *Ergo*, the wrongness of killing does not comply with the restrictions Pleasants imposes on basic moral certainties. This is not a mere local doubt that requires the wrongness of killing as a precondition. It is a meaningful doubt –which cannot be labelled as insane or irrational– of the basic moral certainty at issue: the wrongness of killing.

Pleasants might argue against (1) that the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing only applies to those killings that are murders.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless it is possible to extend the considerations introduced in relation to (1) in order to contend this objection. Consider (2):

(2) A human being *C* murders an innocent human being *D* through the practice of euthanasia in a country where euthanasia is not legalized.

To analyse this case it is necessary to differentiate the notion of ‘murder’ from that of ‘kill’: murder is an unlawful and intentional killing (Murder 2018). In addition, to maintain the similarities between (1) and (2), the physician (i.e. *C*) is one and the same and the innocent human being *D* has exactly the same medical condition.

In (2) *C* carries out the same action as specified in (1), but there is one elementary difference: the country where it occurs. This entails that, whilst *C* is not legally prosecuted for his actions in (1), in (2) s/he commits a murder for which s/he can be legally convicted. Does this generate any changes with regards to the moral evaluation of (2)? It is reasonable to suppose that the moral judgments and evaluations that were sustained regarding (1) would be maintained regarding (2); or, at the very least, it would still be possible to find rational individuals who would not conceive *C* and (2) as morally wrong. This is due to the fact that the moral arguments in favour euthanasia are not generally supported by legality. Conversely,

academics tend to argue in favour of the legality of euthanasia resorting to moral arguments and moral values (e.g. the individual's autonomy and well-being). The existence of rational individuals who do not regard (2) as morally wrong demonstrates that the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong can be meaningfully doubted.

In consequence, cases (1) and (2) fulfil the three conditions specified and meaningfully doubt and challenge the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing. That is, (1) and (2) demonstrate that the wrongness of killing does not fulfil the requirements Pleasants imposes on basic moral certainties.<sup>13</sup> Pleasants' test of certainty suggests that it should sound odd if someone asserted: "I assure you, I know that this killing is morally wrong". The wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty that "is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there –like our life" (Wittgenstein 1975, §559; Pleasants 2009, 676). However, as shown in relation to (1) and (2) it is possible to sensefully assert that the killing of an innocent human being is morally wrong or not and provide arguments to justify this moral judgment. Against Pleasants' test of certainty, we can provide what basis, for which reasons and what it is that makes killing wrong or not. Therefore it is possible to meaningfully doubt that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty. Furthermore, I believe Pleasants (2008b, 263) is mistaken, in light of the considerations introduced throughout this section, to characterize the individuals who argue in favour of euthanasia (i.e. individuals who meaningfully doubt that killing is wrong) as morally incompetent or corrupt.

Against (1) and (2) Pleasants might contend that both cases are exceptions that apply equally "to the basic empirical certainties exhibited by Moore. There could 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" (2008b, 262). *Ergo*, (1) and (2) are not meaningful doubts. Nonetheless, the mistaken claim regarding the possession of a hand is not parallel to the two meaningful doubts introduced. Upon investigation in the battlefield we would determine that, in fact, the aforementioned hand is not ours. Hence, we are not in normal circumstances and the basic empirical certainty at issue does not apply. Conversely, in (1) and (2) the act carried out is the killing of an innocent human being: the normal circumstances are fulfilled. This necessitates negative moral evaluation due to Pleasants' universal basic moral certainty. But we have demonstrated that rational individuals argue in favour of euthanasia morally and legally, thus meaningfully doubting this basic moral certainty.

The exceptions to, and suspensions of, basic moral certainties generate greater issues than Pleasants initially suspects –as I partially argued in section V.3. If these exceptions and suspensions are meaningful doubts (i.e. they fulfil the three conditions specified above) they constitute a serious challenge to Pleasants' proposal. They cannot be averted by claiming that individuals come to accept exceptions, suspensions and justifying circumstances that grant the



possibility to not regard the killing of an innocent individual as an obvious wrong, as Pleasants (2009, 673; 2015, 210) suggests.

The considerations introduced with regards to (1) and (2), by extension, can be employed to meaningfully doubt Burley's (2010) and Pleasants' (2008b; 2009; 2015) basic moral certainty of the badness of death. The basic moral certainties of the wrongness of killing and the badness of death are internally related. Consequently, if it is possible to rationally state that the killing of an innocent human being is not morally wrong, it is also possible to rationally state that the death brought about to this human being is not morally bad. That is, parallel to the killing carried out, the death brought about to the patient when practicing euthanasia is not necessarily regarded as morally bad by rational human beings.

Finally, two clarifications must be introduced with regards to (1) and (2). First, I have introduced (1) and (2) in order to meaningfully doubt the basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing (and, by extension, the badness of death) and demonstrate that it cannot be conceived as a basic moral certainty. This does not entail rejecting Pleasants' idea of basic moral certainties, as he can attempt to provide other basic moral certainties that overcome the issues presented –albeit he must solve the problems outlined in section V. Second, arguing that the wrongness of killing is not a basic moral certainty does not involve the claim that killing innocent human beings is always morally right or justifying that “human life is generally worthless anyway” (Rummens 2013, 135). I am exclusively stating that the wrongness of killing is not a universal basic moral certainty. It can still function as a moral hinge relativized to specific moral language-games, as argued by Kober (1997) and Harre (2010).

## **VII. Conclusion**

The present work has shown, first, that Pleasants' response to Brice's and Rummens' criticisms is insufficient. On the one hand, I have argued that it is uncertain if basic moral certainties are analogous to basic empirical certainties. Arguments are still required in order to demonstrate that basic moral certainties (against Rummens) are not exclusively moral hinges and (against Brice) that basic moral certainties pertain to a bottom-up approach. On the other hand, I have argued that the existence of basic moral certainties that coalesce with numerous exceptions and suspensions generates significant problems in Pleasants' proposal. Second, I have introduced two cases regarding euthanasia that meaningfully doubt and demonstrate the inadequacy of conceiving the wrongness of killing and the badness of death as basic moral certainties. Consequently, Pleasants' main examples of basic moral certainties do not fulfil the requirements he imposes on certainties. Pleasants must provide alternative basic moral certainties whilst, simultaneously, solving the problems outlined in section V.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The problems that I will advance against Pleasants' idea of basic moral certainties do not intend to undermine his proposal; they only indicate shortcomings that require an adequate solution.

<sup>2</sup> Pleasants (2009, 243) defends an 'inviolability reading' of *On Certainty*.

<sup>3</sup> Recently Pleasants (2015, 199-200) has argued in favour of the wrongness of unwarranted infliction of pain as a basic moral certainty. Nevertheless, throughout his work he focuses on the wrongness of killing. Hence the arguments Pleasants introduces do not focus on the wrongness of inflicting pain nor explain why we should conceive it as a basic moral certainty. Furthermore, even if these arguments are provided, it is unclear if the accidental unwarranted infliction of pain to an individual would necessarily entail negative moral evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> Pleasants equates the senseless character of basic moral certainties with the limits of philosophical explanation described by Wittgenstein in "A Lecture on Ethics" (1965). Basic moral certainties "are ensnared in the 'limits of language' that Wittgenstein claimed, in his 1930 'Lecture on ethics', is the inescapable condition of all 'apparently' ethical propositions" (Pleasants 2009, 674). However, basic moral certainties (e.g. the wrongness of killing) cannot be regarded as ethical in a Wittgensteinian sense, since Wittgenstein argues that facts cannot possess ethical value. "A murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone" (Wittgenstein 1965, 6).

<sup>5</sup> There are relativistic readings (see Kober 1997; Harre 2010) of *On Certainty* that understand "that the basic certainties Wittgenstein talks about should not be considered as basic certainties *simpliciter* but rather as certainties *relativized to a particular language game* whereby different and competing language games are constituted by different and incompatible sets of basic certainties" (Rummens 2013, 138).

<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Pleasants (2015, 208-209) references various historians (e.g. Davis 1975; Haskell 1998; Williams 1993) that claim that the core moral rules that people subscribe have remained constant since Ancient civilization. What is subject to variation is the scope and circumstances of application of these rules (see Haskell 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Pleasants (2010) for more on this issue.

<sup>8</sup> Pleasants argues that the issue concerning the scope of basic moral certainties is resolved by determining if we *can* be certain about the wrongness of killing. But he does not appear to provide arguments to demonstrate why we *can* be certain about the wrongness of killing –apart from the test of certainty outlined in section II.

<sup>9</sup> Pleasants utilizes the notion 'in normal circumstances' but does not define what these circumstances are (see section VI for more on this issue).

<sup>10</sup> These conditions are drawn from Pleasants' idea of basic moral certainties and Wittgenstein's observations on basic certainties. Additionally, these three conditions can be reformulated in order to specify the conditions to meaningfully doubt other basic moral certainties.

<sup>11</sup> The work of Jackson and Keown (2012) is a clear-cut case of the moral and legal debate surrounding euthanasia.

<sup>12</sup> Initially, Pleasants (2008b, 256) focuses on murders and if murders are necessarily morally wrong, i.e. if 'wrongful killing' and 'murder' are analytical. This would provide a basic moral certainty. Nevertheless, Pleasants shifts his attention to the wrongness of killing when advancing his idea of basic moral certainties –partially rendering his considerations about murder moot. Moreover, Pleasants'

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(2008b, 257) suggestion that ‘murder’ and ‘wrongful killing’ are analytical is questionable. Murder is generally defined as an unlawful and intentional killing (Murder 2018). This definition does not specify whether the murder is morally wrong or not, since legality and morality are separate issues.

<sup>13</sup> Another possible meaningful doubt, mentioned by Pleasants (2008b, 255-256), can be found in Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903). Moore sustains the following thesis: “the existence of human life is on the whole an evil” (1903, 156). Consequently murder would be good insofar as it reduces the amount of evil in the Universe (Moore 1903, 148).