

If Killing Isn't Wrong, Then Nothing Is: A Naturalistic Defence of Basic Moral Certainty

Nigel Pleasants
University of Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT. This article develops and defends the Wittgensteinian idea of basic moral certainty that I advanced in earlier writings (2008b; 2009). It seeks to defend the core of this idea against criticisms issued by those who are appreciative of Wittgenstein's analysis of *empirical* certainty, but who argue that *moral* certainty is significantly disanalogous to empirical certainty. They maintain that there are no universal moral certainties, only localised (hence relative) certainties embedded in culturally and historically specific moral 'language-games'. In response to these criticisms, I seek to argue for the *universality* and *naturalism* of basic moral certainty, focussing on the central case of the wrongness of killing.

KEYWORDS. Wittgenstein, moral certainty, wrongness of killing

I. INTRODUCTION

In some earlier work (2008b; 2009) I made the case for recognition of the phenomenon of 'basic moral certainty' and its implications for thinking about moral practices and judgement. This was based on the argument that the idea of moral certainty is a natural extension of Wittgenstein's (1975) penetrating observations on the phenomenon of 'empirical' certainty. Wittgenstein famously distinguishes *certainty* from *knowledge*. According to this distinction, those of our true beliefs that are susceptible to justification, challenge and doubt can properly be called 'knowledge'. But our lives, comportment and judgements *show* that there are many things of which we are certain in a very fundamental (basic) way, but which are immune to justification, challenge and doubt, and hence cannot be objects of first-personal knowledge. Moreover, these states of affairs – which Wittgenstein describes as 'standing fast' for us (they are the

grounds, hinges and pivots on which our practices and judgements stand and turn) – are not even amenable to propositional formulation, other than as a philosophical exercise to illustrate the phenomenon of “basic certainty” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2005). Wittgenstein’s observations were mostly directed at empirical phenomena which, for convenience, I refer to as objects of people’s ‘empirical certainty’. Wittgenstein occasionally looked at matters of temporal or logical certainty – but did not consider what I call ‘*moral* certainty’.

There are various ways in which my argument for moral certainty might be criticised. One might simply retort that the idea is hostage to the fortune of Wittgenstein’s radical epistemic critique of G. E. Moore, and that since one rejects this critique, the idea of moral certainty falls with it. But one can side with Moore’s celebrated ‘commonsense’ observations on our (supposedly certain) empirical ‘knowledge’ of the external world and its contents and reject Wittgenstein’s critique while acknowledging the insightfulness of Wittgenstein’s explorations of the objects and circumstances of everyday ‘pre-intentional’ certainty, as does John Searle (2002, chapter 14). Moreover, there is also a straight Moorean version of the idea of moral certainty, as propounded by Renford Bambrough (1979). Bambrough replicates Moore’s hand-waving manoeuvre with the modification that he invokes instead a child about to undergo painful surgery, with the conclusion that this child should therefore be given an anaesthetic. Bambrough exhibits this as a moral proposition that we know to be certainly true. One could thus hold on to a notion of both empirical and moral certainty that traces back to Moore, without recourse to Wittgenstein’s radical epistemology. But this, in my view, yields only a limited perspective on the role of empirical and moral certainty in our lives. The benefit of keeping the idea of moral certainty within the frame of Wittgenstein’s radical epistemology, I contend, is that it chimes harmoniously with our actual moral phenomenology.

However, a more troublesome challenge to the idea of basic moral certainty comes from those philosophers who accept Wittgenstein’s idea

of basic empirical certainty but argue that moral certainty is significantly disanalogous to empirical certainty. Critics of the idea of basic moral certainty, such as Robert Brice (2013) and Steffan Rummens (2013), and proponents of different versions of moral certainty, such as Michael Kober (1997) and Rom Harre (2010), argue that there are no *universal* moral certainties. They maintain that there are only *localised* certainties embedded in culturally and historically specific moral language-games. They argue, moreover, so they argue, that which is morally certain in one such language-game may be rejected or simply absent in another. For example, the belief that human beings have fundamental rights – to life, liberty, etc. – is a 'local' certainty of our modern western moral language-games, but does not feature in the moral language-games played by people at other times and places. Conversely, certainties that did feature in some of *their* language-games, such as those on slavery (Rummens 2013, 135), contravene *our* certainty on the inalienability and fundamentality of human rights. (I hasten to add that notions of inalienable and fundamental human rights are not included in my conception of basic moral certainty.)

The purpose of the present article is to reiterate the core ideas in the concept of basic moral certainty by defending it against some of the main criticisms that it has provoked. In particular, I will defend it against the arguments for moral certainty being relativistically limited to a plurality of cultural and historical contexts, and disjunctive from Wittgenstein's treatment of basic empirical certainties. I will thereby seek to bring out the universality and naturalism of basic moral certainty.

II. BASIC MORAL CERTAINTY AND THE WRONGNESS OF KILLING: A BRIEF RESTATEMENT

The two central examples of basic moral certainty that I presented and explored previously were the badness of death and the wrongness of killing. I should add that the wrongness of unwarranted infliction of pain

and other forms of suffering are basic moral certainties too. In what follows, I shall concentrate mostly on the wrongness of killing, since it is this that has attracted most of the criticism (Burley [2010] endorses my claim that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty, but argues against the claim that the badness of death is too).

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. That it is very wrong to kill an innocent and non-threatening person, absent special excusing or justifying circumstances, is so fundamental to our human form of life and individual moral consciousness as to be recalcitrant to propositional formulation. Here is a practical test for basic certainty status: for any candidate certainty, try to perform the kind of operation that Wittgenstein carried out on Moore's examples. Imagine what you would make of someone asserting (outside of a philosophy seminar or some other special circumstance) "this is my hand"; or "I cannot be sure that this is my hand"; or "I know that this is my hand because I learned of its existence when I was very young and I know that it hasn't been replaced by anyone else's, or by a prosthetic replica".

Likewise, 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. One does not actually have to *imagine* these things being asserted, questioned and justified, for there is a sizeable and growing philosophical literature that seeks to explain and justify why killing is wrong. I quoted some paradigmatic examples of this activity in an earlier paper and reiterate a selection here:

What makes killing wrong is that it causes premature death, and premature death is a misfortune because it deprives an individual of a future of value (Marquis 1997, 96).

Murder [...] is harmful to its victim because it is an irreversible loss to the person who was murdered of functions necessary for his worthwhile existence (Levenbook 1984, 412).

What makes killing another human being wrong is its character as an irrevocable, maximally unjust prevention of the realization of the victim's life-purposes (Young 1979, 519).

More recently, in an article on the wrongness of killing, Carlos Soto states that “[...] there is good reason to think that one of the features that make killing persons wrong is the *imposition* on a person's sovereignty over her life” (2013, 551). Likewise, in a ‘feature article’ entitled “What Makes Killing Wrong?”, Sinnott-Armstrong and Miller answer their titular question with the explanation that what makes killing wrong is that it causes the victim's “universal and irreversible disability” (2013, 3). Critical responses to this article by Jeff McMahan (2013) and David DeGrazia (2013) object that universal and irreversible disability does not capture what is distinctively wrong with killing. For this, they counter, one needs a standard harm-based account that identifies the harm incurred as the loss of a future or the goods that the victim would have enjoyed had their future not been taken away by being killed (that is, an account of the kind advanced by Marquis, Levenbook, and Young quoted above and others not quoted here).

To my ears, and I'm sure also to the ears of non-philosophers, there is something deeply peculiar about these purported explanations. They evince in me the same kind of reaction as that reported by Wittgenstein in response to the empirical certainties exhibited by Moore: “[...] even though I find it quite correct for someone to say ‘Rubbish!’ and so brush aside the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock, -- nevertheless, I hold it to be incorrect if he seeks to defend himself (using, e.g., the words ‘I know’)” (Wittgenstein 1975, 498). It is not that these purported explanations of the wrongness of killing are *false*; just like Moore's assertions, they state things that are *true* – it really is the case that the person killed suffers universal and irreversible disability, the loss of functions

necessary for worthwhile existence, etc. Rather, their peculiarity stands out in their bathetic discordance with the moral *gravity* of the wrongness of killing. I have found, upon reading these explanations to various audiences, that they typically elicit a mirthful reaction – which is not what one would expect from a reaction to hearing about such a weighty matter as the wrongness of killing. I take it that the mirth evinced is the result of having one’s basic moral certainty agitated.

I maintain, then, that the wrongness of killing must be considered a basic moral certainty because its wrongness cannot sensefully be asserted, explained or doubted, and it (the certainty) serves as a fundamental condition of human morality as such. To coin a well-worn spatial metaphor from the early Wittgenstein (reiterated in his “Lecture on Ethics” [1965]), we are here up against the limits of philosophical explanation, and the attempt to go beyond these limits yields patent absurdity. Even the mere assertion, outside of specialised philosophical language-games, that killing is wrong sounds decidedly odd. Again, what would you make of someone who suddenly opined in general discussion that “it’s wrong to kill people”? Would you not worry why on earth they would say such a thing? Is it any less odd than someone saying “It’s wrong to eat people”? In short, I conclude that our very notion of moral wrongness is grounded in our thinking, judging and saying that particular acts and practices are wrong *because* they unjustly inflict death, pain and other modes of suffering on people. To then ask: “And why is it wrong to kill and inflict pain gratuitously?” is rather like the unanswerable “Whys?” that 3-year olds notoriously persist in asking after perfectly definitive answers to their questions (one inexorably concludes that such infants have not yet learned how to play the language-games of asking questions and receiving answers).

I now want to look at the objections of critics who have denied that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty of the same kind as ‘empirical certainty’, and who maintain that there are no non-relativized moral certainties.

III. MORAL *VERSUS* EMPIRICAL CERTAINTIES?

The very idea of there being any basic moral certainties has been called into question by Rummens who maintains that there is no “[...] full parallel between the empirical and the moral realm” (2013, 136) This is because whereas one cannot violate or ignore an object of empirical certainty one can perform acts the moral wrongness of which is supposed by me to be a basic certainty. As Rummens puts it, “[...] the murderer is physically capable of violating the moral norm he himself endorses” [whereas] “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” (2013, 144).

My first rejoinder to this is to point out that in both the above cases the actor can in fact act in a way that goes against the moral and physical ‘rule’ (moral and empirical certainty) that they themselves otherwise endorse. And in so doing both – the murderer and the would-be flier – will receive the negative sanctions that inevitably follow upon such acts. That is to say, one *can* jump out of a window while flapping one’s arms in a ‘flying’ motion (despite being certain that it won’t work), and suffer the empirical consequences. Likewise, one *can* violate the moral rule against killing, and suffer the normative sanction of guilt and punishment. Durkheim (1965) makes just this argument, pointing to the analogous negative consequences of violating what he calls ‘technical rules’ (rules that seek to protect people from the untoward consequences of mishandling states of the physical world) and ‘moral rules’.

The murderer does not lose or give up their certainty that killing is morally wrong by committing murder. Indeed, whilst most of us no doubt possess the *subjective* certainty that we simply *could not* commit murder, empirical evidence provided by the social and historical sciences, and the law courts, demonstrates that some thoroughly ordinary and good people just like us *do* sometimes perform such acts. In a word, moral certainty is about what one *should not* do, not what one

cannot do – this is what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark or reminder about morality. On the other hand, I am not so sure that the objects of empirical certainty do impose themselves with an irresistible force of a kind that the objects of basic moral certainty lack. Physical reality does not *force* me to believe that every human head has a brain inside it or that planet earth is more than 50 years old (there were people in the past that did not believe these things), any more than the moral and criminal rule prohibiting murder *incapacitates* me from committing it. Many basic empirical certainties are grounded in *social* belief, the forcefulness of which is *normative*, not physical. I am certain of these things not because I have personally carried out investigations to establish their truth, but because I live in an epistemic community in which everyone believes them, and either to doubt them or to take action to verify them would call into question my competence or sanity.

In a word, the basic moral certainty that killing is wrong is not violated by performing, or being able to perform, that act. Equally, doing, or being able to do, that which is morally wrong does not thereby exclude one from the certainty that it *is* wrong. It is, after all, commonplace for people to do things that they know to be wrong. And in the most extreme cases, both the severely cognitively impaired (insane) person and the emotionally impaired (psychopathic) person stand out as deviants against our basic empirical and moral certainty. Thus I reject Rummens' claim that moral certainty is disjunctively disanalogous to empirical certainty in virtue of the recalcitrant physicality of the objects of empirical certainty *versus* the alleged voluntariness of the norms that prohibit wrongful killing. Such differences as there obviously are between the *objects* of basic empirical and basic moral certainty do not amount to a relevant difference between the respective states of *certainty* itself. Moreover, I will proceed to argue shortly that, in contrast to the *normative* source of much of our basic empirical certainty, the source of our basic moral certainty on the wrongness of killing is *natural*.

IV. RELATIVE MORAL CERTAINTY?

Rummens, and Brice, draw attention to the ostensibly 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. Such institutionalised practices as infanticide, witch-burning, child labour, the slave trade and slavery, colonialism, the Nazi Holocaust and other genocides, immediately come to mind. If the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty, why is it that so many people have acted and continue to act in ways that are so certainly morally wrong?

I start with the problem allegedly posed by historical and cultural relativism. Brice (2013, 480) insists that concepts like ‘innocent’ and ‘person’ only make sense and have meaning within particular forms of life or moral language-games. Thus the claim that every competent agent is possessed of the basic moral certainty that it is wrong to kill innocent and non-threatening human persons overlooks the fact that what counts as *innocent*, *non-threatening*, and a *person* is chronically variable. He therefore contends that “[...] the wrongness of killing an innocent, non-threatening person is not a universally held certainty” (2013, 480); it is rather an item of “moral knowledge” (2013, 485) that is socially learned, and certain only “to those of us in this form of life” (2013, 483). Moreover, it is a conviction that we “arrive at”, not “begin with” (2013, 485). Rummens adds the assertion that there are no basic moral certainties, only “[...] a plethora of radically incompatible moral language games that deny some or even most of the moral certainties we take for granted” (2013, 144).

I do not deny that the historical and cultural record seems to show a catalogue of radical differences in moral perception, judgment, action and institutionalised practice. These differences are so striking that one might well be tempted to conclude that there is no universally held certainty on the wrongness of killing and infliction of pain and suffering on innocents, because so much of it has gone on (at other times and in other

places). However, one does not really need to invoke this cultural and historical variability in order to make this case against basic moral certainty. For there are surely enough apparent exceptions to the wrongness of killing in our own familiar social world to cast doubt on the idea of basic moral certainty without needing to look elsewhere. The very same evidence that critics such as Rummens and Brice invoke from other societies can be found in our own society (paraphrasing Wittgenstein [1980, 50]: one does not have to dig deep for such evidence; just take a look round our own familiar surroundings).

The core idea of what basic moral certainty consists in is that its object is the wrongness of killing, inflicting pain, etc. *per se*. But this basic 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. One would like to think that such reasons come into view only when even more innocent lives and suffering are at stake, such as with humanitarian rescue or self-defence, but it is hard to see the many instances of killing of innocent civilians by our governments' military forces properly falling under these categories. Indeed, for some time there has been in place the implicit calculation that the life of one member of *our* military forces has greater value than any number of another country's civilians. Nevertheless, my point here is not to engage in social criticism – although that would undoubtedly be warranted – but just to observe that acknowledgement of the permissibility of killing *some* innocent and non-(directly) threatening people (for good reasons) sits cheek by jowl with the basic certainty that it is wrong to kill innocent and non-threatening people. This point is redolent of the one previously made about the murderer not *ipso facto* losing his or her certainty of the wrongness of killing. Thus I do not accept Rummens and Brice's concession that *we* have (arrived at) a kind and degree of moral certainty of the wrongness of killing that *others* lack. I would say, rather, that all societies have it, and all allow some exceptions to it (albeit often quite different ones). To prosecute

this point I will consider two commonly cited historical episodes that supposedly exhibit a glaring absence of the basic moral certainty that it is wrong to kill and inflict pain on innocent and non-threatening people.

The wrongness of killing was surely not a basic moral certainty held by many in Nazi German society, was it? Didn't that regime, with the aid of many of its citizens, engage in "[...] the systematic killing of huge numbers of innocent human beings" (Rummens 2013, 144)? Yes, of course it and they did. But so too did the British and American governments, with the aid of their citizenry. I do not want to make a cheap point about possible moral equivalences. I do not need to claim anything so preposterous as that the allies matched the moral crimes of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, the allies *did* engage in what is aptly described as "[...] the systematic killing of huge numbers of innocent human beings" (in Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, among other places).

The Third Reich was indeed, to put it mildly, extraordinarily brutal in its attitude towards human life. So much was this the case that its degree of brutality might well be thought to have made that regime fatally unsustainable, as other extraordinarily brutal regimes have proven to be (this kind of argument has been advanced by Joshua Cohen [1997], and other moral realists, in explanation of the demise of institutionalised slavery). Thus one might think that it was the acute *disintegration* of moral certainty on the wrongness of killing and infliction of pain on innocents that contributed significantly to the collapse of these regimes. In which case, the claim for the universality of basic moral certainty would be qualified by the exception of pathologically genocidal and otherwise murderous regimes, of which there have been many instances in 19th and 20th century modern society.

However, I am more inclined to say that the societal membership of the Third Reich and kindred regimes was much the same as ours with regard to possession of basic moral certainty on the wrongness of killing. It is just that their citizens very quickly learned to admit far more

exceptions to it than normal modern societies allow. Consider here what historians have depicted as the process of rapid “cumulative radicalization” (Mommsen 1997) in Nazi German society, beginning with the medical provision of so-called ‘euthanasia’ for seriously disabled children upon parental request, and ending with genocidal death camps for Jews. Even so, I contend that the people of this society did not *lose* their basic moral certainty on the wrongness of killing. Rather, they learned to withdraw that certainty from whole kinds of people who came to be re-categorised as dangerously threatening non-persons, whilst holding on to it for those that they continued to recognise as *bona fide* moral persons. Outrageous as it may sound, there is reason to think that the perpetrators conceived their genocidal killing as self-defensively motivated (see Scarre 1998).

Let us consider next the case of the European slave trade, American slavery and the institution of slavery. The fact that modern colonial states and their peoples participated in these institutionalised practices is often held up as evidence that even in our recent history it was not considered wrong to seize, kill, incarcerate, torture and assault innocent and non-threatening people, and to trade them as mere commodities on the commercial market. Conversely, it is suggested that this evidence shows that the basic moral certainty of it being wrong to kill and inflict pain, etc. on innocent people is a recent acquisition of modern postcolonial democratic western societies. But I side here with Bernard Williams’ (1993) dismissal of such thinking as deluded ‘progressivism’. Indeed, some of the leading historians of slavery and abolition maintain that people’s powers of moral perception and judgment, and the core moral rules to which they subscribe, have remained pretty constant at least since Ancient civilisation (Davis 1975; Haskell 1998; Williams 1993). That is to say, we modern people are no more (nor less) morally sensitive and sophisticated than our distant ancestors. The basic rules and imperatives of morality, that is, the golden rule of treating others as one would want to be treated oneself, and that it is wrong to hurt and kill people, are largely invariant. What *is*

subject to variation and change is the scope, range and circumstances of application of those rules (see Haskell's [1998] detailed theoretical and historically illustrated argument for this conclusion).

These historians tell us that people in slave-owning and slave-trading societies were able to see that slaves suffered badly and that their existential condition was woeful. And yet, at the same time, the institutions that kept slaves in this condition were seen as perfectly just, or at least not unjust. Is this not incoherent and contradictory? No. Slavery was seen as a natural and inevitable feature of the social world for most of those who lived with it, and slaves were seen as a certain kind of restricted human being, suited only for enslavement. If this seems incredible, just reflect on our attitude now toward the millions of people we know to be dying from starvation and disease in some parts of the world. When we contemplate their fate (which we rarely spend time or energy doing) do we not feel genuine compassion and sympathy for them – alongside regret that there is nothing we can do to help (even though they could quite easily be helped), and then quickly change the subject? This 'passive sympathy' for the victim, as Thomas Haskell (1998) calls it, looks quite familiar to me, characterising many people's attitude to such things as abortion, military action, road traffic injuries and fatalities, and the killing and vivisection of animals. I'm not saying that these institutionalised practices are morally wrong. My point rather is to observe that institutionalised 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, 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 (see Pleasants [2010] for further argumentation on the ideas and claims in this paragraph). Thus the existence of institutionalised practices in one's society through which innocent and non-threatening victims regrettably suffer pain and death does not subvert our basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing and infliction of suffering as such.

My central claim is that basic moral certainty on the wrongness of killing and infliction of pain transcends history and culture (and moral language-games). On this I find myself aligned with some socio-biologists, in regarding this certainty as 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). What *is* learned, and socially and culturally variable, I contend, 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. I agree that the history of morals displays widespread variability of judgement and practice – but what is relative to time and place are ideas and beliefs on what is not to count as wrongful killing (very often on the grounds of a taken for granted naturalness, necessity, or unavoidability of the deaths involved) not the wrongness of killing as such.

V. OF *WHAT*, EXACTLY, ARE WE BASICALLY MORALLY CERTAIN?

One manoeuvre in my attempt to rebut the ‘relativism’ objection to the idea of basic moral certainty has been to show that we are not significantly different to our predecessors in terms of our attitudes to the wrongness of killing and infliction of pain and suffering on innocents. I then sought to argue that it is judgement on the categories of being and circumstances of death that are deemed *exceptions* to the wrongness of killing that is historically and culturally relative, not the wrongness of killing as such. But this throws up another problem, namely: 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. Surely there are only a tiny number of people, namely pacifists, who exhibit an unqualified and unrestricted certainty over the wrongness of killing *per se*? Actually, there is probably no pacifist either who believes

that *all* types of killing are morally wrong (e.g. including the killing of foetuses, animals, oneself, and chronically suffering patients in acts of voluntary euthanasia). One might think, therefore, that the list of possible exceptions to the wrongness of killing is so long that the idea that the wrongness of killing is a basic moral certainty suffers the death of a thousand qualifications.

My initial response to this problem is that the general idea of basic certainty conceives this certainty as inhering in the unspoken and the taken for granted. Therefore, it is no great embarrassment to the concept of basic moral certainty that it is not possible to specify definitively which kinds of being, in which circumstances, certainty over the wrongness of killing includes and which it excludes. The concept of basic certainty requires no such explicitness. 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.

The substantial question though is not the formulability of the precise range of cases and circumstances to which basic moral certainty applies, but whether we *can* be morally certain about something that admits as many exceptions as the wrongness of killing seemingly does. One could claim that many of the apparent exceptions to the wrongness of killing are not really exceptions because these killings are done as the 'lesser of two evils' to save a greater number, or higher value, of lives of other innocent and non-threatening people. I have already conceded that many of these apparently justified killings are justified only on pretty flimsy reasons. So how can we be said to hold basic moral certainty of the wrongness of killing when we allow, collude or participate in so many acts and practices that cause the deaths of innocent people, often for quite lightweight reasons? Three possible responses to this question come to mind. One is that because of our tolerance of the innocent being killed, not only are we not *certain* of the wrongness of killing, we do not believe it to be wrong *as such* at all. Another response is to concede that, in virtue of our having basic moral certainty over the wrongness of killing innocent

and non-threatening people *and* allowing exceptions to it, our moral psychology is contradictory and incoherent. The third response, which I favour, is that there is no incompatibility, contradiction or incoherence in both having basic moral certainty that killing is wrong and allowing it to be permissible in some cases. I will now offer a defence of this response.

Despite our complicity in widespread killing and suffering, it remains the case that the vast majority of people, *in normal circumstances*, eschew and abhor personal participation in it. Phenomenologically, when perceiving or reflecting on cases even of killings that one takes to be *justified*, the experience of the act's abhorrence is automatic for most people (consider, for example, the emotional and visceral reactions of Himmler and Eichmann to witnessing scenes of mass killings that they believed to be fully justified [see Arendt 1963]). The judgment that a killing is justified inheres in a cognitive process that is quite distinct from the immediate experience of the act's abhorrence (see Cushman, *et al.* 2012). I take this to be evidence of the basicness of our certainty that killing as such is wrong.

The widespread complicity in killing and suffering to which I have drawn attention admits of some mitigation in terms of its implication for the idea of basic moral certainty. People are motivated by a wide range of interests, and the interest in being morally good, or even morally decent, is only one among them. Moral reasons for acting are of course august and powerful ones, but philosophers are often tempted to engage in what Wittgenstein might call the 'sublimation' of the concept of a moral reason. That is, moral reasons are sometimes presented as having irresistible and infeasible force – if one recognises a moral reason for not doing X, then one cannot reasonably do anything other than not-X.

But we know that people are weak, and they often do not, or are unable to, do what they themselves believe they should. People are also inveterately self-interested and limited in concern for others to those with whom they have 'special ties' of obligation or affection – and many moral and political philosophers think reasonably so. These factors generate powerful psychological strategies for avoiding or not recognising moral

reasons for critical action when such action would come at a certain cost. Thus it is that, 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. Moreover, the institutionalised practices of one's society through which much killing and suffering is inflicted on innocents are structured and organised in such a way as to make it genuinely hard for people to see or acknowledge its occurrence. Indeed, the sheer fact of institutionalisation (the form that nearly all exceptions to the wrongness of killing take) makes for a resilient shield that prevents citizens from perceiving possible wrongdoing being done in and by their society, or their personal complicity in it (see Pleasants 2008a). But even if one does manage to see through the conventionality that provides moral legitimation for institutionalised practices that inflict death and suffering on innocents, and still fail to act against them, one continues to be certain of the moral wrongness of killing while regretting one's socially structured complicity in it. This is the social equivalent of the murderer not *ipso facto* revealing a lack of basic moral certainty over the wrongness of killing (which is not to say that personal complicity in institutionalised killing and suffering is morally equivalent to being a murderer).

VI. CONCLUSION

I end with some brief speculative observations on what I believe to be welcome implications of the idea of basic moral certainty. It is, I think, a thoroughlygoingly naturalistic concept (there are pronounced naturalistic undertones to Wittgenstein's own observations in *On Certainty*). Our basic empirical certainties, as pointed out by other Wittgensteinian scholars, are grounded in the fundamental physicality and temporality of the world in which we live. Likewise, our basic moral certainties, I contend, are grounded in our biological and social nature. We are finite, sentient, vulnerable creatures, or in MacIntyre's nice turn of phrase, "dependent

rational animals” (2013). Basic moral certainty is a reflection of our human social nature, our deepest collective interest in living together cooperatively, productively, harmoniously, and in a way that enables us to flourish both individually and collectively. History shows an astonishing growth in the power and sophistication of our empirical knowledge; I think it also exhibits palpable growth in ‘moral knowledge’ (broadly conceived), as graphically illustrated in the image of the expanding moral circle that Peter Singer (1983) took over and popularised from the nineteenth century historian W.E.H. Lecky. Of course, there remain many morally bad states of affairs. The idea of basic moral certainty, I submit, both makes best sense of our collective moral development, and is an important way of grounding progressive moral dispute and argument.¹

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NOTES

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