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On losing certainty

Matthew Ratcliffe[1]

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Abstract
This paper develops a phenomenological account of what it is to lose a primitive and pervasive sense of *certainty*. I begin by considering Wolfgang Blankenburg's descriptions of losing *common sense* or *natural self-evidence*. Although Blankenburg focuses primarily on schizophrenia, I note that a wider range of phenomenological disturbances can be understood in similar terms—one loses something that previously operated as a pre-reflective, unquestioned basis for experience, thought, and practice. I refer to this as the loss of *certainty*. Drawing upon and integrating themes in the work of Wittgenstein and Husserl, I propose that losses of certainty centrally involve the inability to tolerate a certain kind of *uncertainty*. The contrast between having and lacking certainty is to be construed in terms of differing patterns or styles of nonlocalized, practical, bodily anticipation. I conclude by showing how this conception enables us to better understand various different disturbances to which human experience is susceptible.

Keywords Anticipation · Blankenburg · Certainty · Husserl · Indeterminacy · Uncertainty · Wittgenstein

1 Introduction

This paper sets out a phenomenological account of what it is to lose a pervasive and primitive sense of certainty. The certainty that I am concerned with here is not a matter of endorsing however many propositional beliefs with complete confidence, however general their contents might be. It is something singular but nonlocalized in nature, something that is more usually presupposed by our various experiences, thoughts, and activities. I will develop the position that losses of certainty centrally

✉ Matthew Ratcliffe
matthew.ratcliffe@york.ac.uk

[1] Department of Philosophy, University of York, Heslington York YO10 5DD, UK

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involve changes in our orientation towards *uncertainty*. It is not—as one might suppose—that things in general seem more uncertain. Rather, we become unable to accept a form of uncertainty that is phenomenologically ubiquitous. Consequently, we face the preponderance of a different *kind* of uncertainty. Losses of certainty can occur in a range of circumstances, with more extreme forms falling within the purview of psychiatry. They are invariably challenging to describe and express, and I will suggest an emphasis on ways of encountering uncertainty can aid us in doing so.

To identify the phenomenon in question, I begin by turning to the work of Wolfgang Blankenburg, focusing on an article first published in 1969 and later translated into English (Blankenburg, 2001).[1] Following this, I show how we can further elucidate the relevant phenomenology by drawing on themes in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and in his later notes published as *On Certainty*. Although this points to a singular account of what it is to have and to lose certainty, I remain agnostic over whether such a position should be attributed to Wittgenstein. However, even if his various remarks are not integrated in quite the way or to the extent that I propose, they help to point us in the right direction when considered together.[2] I go on to suggest that Husserl (1948/1973) approaches this same aspect of experience, albeit from a different direction. Furthermore, by appealing to Husserl's distinction between "problematic" and "open" possibility or uncertainty, we can avoid falling prey to linguistic and conceptual confusion over the contrast between certainty and uncertainty. The resultant analysis promises to illuminate a variety of experiences, all of which incorporate disturbances of certainty.

2 Loss of common sense

According to Blankenburg (2001, 1971/2012), certain wide-ranging phenomenological disturbances involve a loss of "natural self-evidence" or what might be termed "common sense".[3] He maintains that such disturbances characterize some but not all psychiatric conditions. For instance, obsessive-compulsive disorder involves seeking assurance over trivial matters that are ordinarily taken as "a matter of course", whereas at least some forms of depression involve an over-attachment to commonsense. However, it is with schizophrenia that we arrive at "the proper domain for the psychopathology of *common sense*" (Blankenburg, 2001, p.305). Initially, one might lose a pre-reflective, practical sense of social appropriateness. In more extreme forms, this loss extends to all aspects of experience, thought, and practice. Everything

[1] Blankenburg also provides a broader and more detailed discussion in the book *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit* (1971/2012), which has not been translated into English.

[2] Hence, my principal aim is not to provide a historically accurate reading of Wittgenstein but to draw on his writings in order to develop a philosophical position that can be evaluated on its own terms. See Coliva (2016) for discussion of this distinction. Should my approach also serve to illuminate Wittgenstein's own thought, then so much the better.

[3] Blankenburg considers various ways in which the term "common sense" has been understood, noting its "sponginess" and how this contributes to rather than detracts from its "richness and vitality" (Blankenburg, 2001, p.304).

appears oddly unfamiliar, bereft of something previously taken for granted. Blankenburg draws on first-person descriptions such as the following:

> Every person knows how to behave, to take a direction, or to think something specific. The person's taking actions, humanity, ability to socialize….all these involve rules that the person follows. I am not able to recognize what these rules are. I am missing the basics….It just does not work for me….Each thing builds on the next….I don't know what to call this….It is not knowledge…. Every child knows these things! It is the kind of thing you just get naturally. (Blankenburg, 2001, pp.307-8)

Although Blankenburg focuses on phenomenological disturbances associated specifically with schizophrenia diagnoses, I am concerned with a broader phenomenon, which can take a range of qualitatively different forms. Some of these might correspond to specific psychiatric diagnoses, but I do not seek to defend that position here. Like Blankenburg (1971/2012, p.76), I also maintain that losses of natural self-evidence are not limited to psychiatric contexts. What Blankenburg identifies can be described in various ways—it encompasses our ability to trust, our sense of familiarity, our habits, and the flow of our experiences and thoughts. A consistent theme is that what was once obvious now seems perplexing; all sense of "obviousness" is gone from experience. This is not merely a loss of *confidence* in our beliefs or abilities; it can span the reliability of our beliefs, what we mean with our words, what is likely to happen next, how our surroundings look to us, what kinds of entities we take ourselves to perceive, the situational appropriateness and efficacy of our actions, and even our ability to discriminate between intentional attitudes of different kinds, such as perceiving, remembering, and imagining. At the same time, however, this phenomenological change concerns something singular, something so deeply engrained in all of our experience, thought, and practice that we do not notice it until it is disrupted—an "original unity of thinking, feeling, and willing in human existence" (Blankenburg, 2001, p.307). Given this emphasis on what was once *obvious*, unquestionable, or taken for granted, I will refer throughout to losses of "certainty" (while allowing that the relevant experiences can also be described in various other ways). Another reason for this terminological choice is that "certainty" [*Gewissheit*] is a term used by both Wittgenstein and Husserl to identify what I take to be the same phenomenon. My aim in what follows is to develop a phenomenological account of what it is to have and lose certainty by integrating some complementary and mutually illuminating themes in their writings.[4]

[4] This differs from Blankenburg's own engagement with Husserl, which involves comparing the methodological procedure of bracketing the *natural attitude* (construed as a matter of pre-reflective, practically engaged experience) to a *loss* of the natural attitude that is characteristic of schizophrenia (Blankenburg, 1971/2012, pp.86–93). However, given that what I refer to as "certainty" is integral and indeed essential to the natural attitude, the two approaches can be regarded as complementary.

3 Wittgenstein on expectation

To explicate what it is to have and lose certainty, I will start from some of Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations*. At several points in this text, Wittgenstein repeats the sentence "Now I can go on". For example, "He finds the series 4, 6, 8, 10 and says: Now I can go on" (PI, 151). The problem at hand concerns what grounds we have for following "10" with "12" rather than with a different number or—for that matter—anything else; we might take the next appropriate move to be singing a song or putting the kettle on. In seeking norms that guide our practice in determinate ways and do not themselves rest upon yet further norms, we eventually face the prospect that nothing tells us how to "go on". There is much debate over how, exactly, Wittgenstein's discussion should be interpreted and how plausible the position is. Kripke (1982) famously—and controversially—sets out the problem as a regress of rules, which can only end in activities unconstrained by norms; one just *does*. According to Kripke, it is not merely an epistemological problem concerning how we know what to do. Without norms to specify what ought to follow *p*, there is no fact of the matter over whether an individual means *p* or *q* and consequently no way they can mean anything.[5]

This could be construed as a purely theoretical matter, one that will only ever trouble certain philosophers. Indeed, Kripke (1982, p.87) observes that it "holds no terror in our daily lives". However, although most people do not spend their time worrying about how they can mean *p* rather than *q*, I think the larger problem Wittgenstein identifies is in fact a frequent source of anxiety, disorientation, distress, even terror. What is "now I can go on" properly contrasted with—what is it to be *unable* to go on in the relevant sense? It is not principally a matter of musing over how one could ever mean *p* rather than *q*. Instead, I suggest that we turn to the "I can't go on" or "I don't know how to go on" of grief, trauma, upheaval, psychiatric illness, and serious somatic illness. In short, the focus of Wittgenstein's concern ultimately coincides with that of Blankenburg.

As Blankenburg (2001, p.306) notes, losses of common sense can first become apparent to oneself and others as an inability to "play along with the rules of the game of interpersonal behavior". The situation, as experienced, no longer includes a sense of what comes next and what is to be done. Granted, a pervasive loss of pre-reflective certainty might seem a far cry from worrying about the grounding for mathematical rules. But the common theme is that, in seeking a basis for carrying on in one way rather than any other way, we find nothing that can do the job. This applies to all norm-governed practices, to all saying and all doing. As Blankenburg's descriptions further indicate, the problem identified by Wittgenstein is something that can be *lived* rather than just contemplated philosophically. There is something we do not ordinarily look for and, when we do look for it, it turns out to be absent. Having certainty, I will propose, is a matter of not feeling the urge to look in the first place. Both theory and practice presuppose something elusive, something that can only operate effectively if it does *not* become an explicit object of scrutiny. With its diminution or disruption, one might remark that everything "feels" somehow different, perilous,

[5] For a comprehensive discussion and defence of Kripke's Wittgenstein, see Kusch (2006).

insecure, no longer dependable. Of course, Wittgenstein is wary of appeals to mysterious *feelings*, as a basis for normativity or for anything else. However, he is troubled for the most part by a particular conception of feelings, as ineffable qualia that are present to us in their entirety at a given moment. And, where certainty and rule-following are concerned, his remarks point to a different conception of the relevant feelings, one that can aid us in understanding what it is to have certainty.

At several points in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein muses over a seemingly paradoxical experience, where something appears to be both *there* and *not there*. For example, he asks what it is to grasp something "in a flash" (PI, 139). There is a discernible transition from not grasping it to grasping it, but the difference between the two is elusive, as grasping something in a flash does not involve it appearing instantaneously in its entirety. Appealing to a "special experience" does not help matters, at least not without further qualification (PI, 155). However, this should not be construed as a dismissal of *any* attempt at phenomenological clarification. Instead, Wittgenstein tells us where to look, by emphasizing anticipation and how it incorporates indeterminacy. Consider suddenly remembering a tune:

> I want to remember a tune and it escapes me; suddenly I say "Now I know it" and I sing it. What was it like to suddenly know it? Surely it can't have occurred to me *in its entirety* in that moment! (PI, 184)

The insight described here involves neither "not knowing *p*" nor "currently having a complete grasp of *p*". What has changed with "now I know it" is that we have found a path to follow. The route is not set out in its entirety, but we have acquired a sense of being able to do the right thing when the time comes, from one moment to the next. This could indeed be characterized as a sort of feeling, but one that amounts to an indeterminate pattern of anticipation rather than a momentary quale. "Now I know it" thus involves a different *way* of anticipating. As Wittgenstein remarks later in the text, grasping something in a flash only seems astonishing "when we are led to think that the future development must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn't present" (PI, 197). He further acknowledges that the realization, "now I know how to go on", is compatible with being mistaken or later becoming lost. Having set out on a path, I can then "find I am stuck when I do try to go on" (PI, 323).

Hence, the confidence expressed by "now I can go on" consists in a kind of attitude or orientation towards what is coming. One takes the path to be navigable, even though the route is not fully clear. This point is not limited to eureka moments. In more mundane scenarios, this same form of anticipation encompasses spoken language, linguistic thought, bodily activities, and our experiences of events in the surrounding environment. So, the issue Wittgenstein identifies is not limited to rigid, norm-governed sequences, such as "2, 4, 6, 8….", where there is a single right answer to the question "what comes next?" He unearths something more general—what must be taken for granted if we are to go on at all. Even though it may not amount to a comprehensive account of why "8" is to be followed with "10" instead of "cheeseburger", it is still *necessary* for our being able to go on in any area of practice.

One might object that being able to anticipate what is coming next is altogether different from an appreciation of what ought to be done next. However, in the context of our various activities, the two are inextricable. Without any sense of what is coming next, there could be no grasp of what ought to be done next. In addition, without any sense of situationally appropriate activities, anticipation would be lacking in structure; unfolding events would not be organized in terms of their practical relevance. A sense of certainty thus encompasses both. It further includes our pre-reflective appreciation that we have been acting in an appropriate way and that our current situation is as anticipated.

Consistent with this, Wittgenstein identifies the pre-reflective certainty that we can go on with a kind of practical, bodily expectation. As he writes, the "certainty that I shall be able to go on" is comparable to the "certainty that the fire will burn me" as I move my hand towards it (PI, 325). It can be added that the expectation of being burned is not fully determinate—we could end up with a mild burn, a severe burn, a blister, something that takes a longer or shorter time to heal, something that becomes more or less painful with time. The general expectation of being burned can thus be fulfilled in a number of different ways. So, certainty of this kind does not involve a fully determinate sense of what is to come. Instead, it requires a complete absence of *competing* expectations. For example, the possibilities of one's finger feeling ice-cold or being tickled by the flame do not challenge the bodily expectation of getting burned.

Expectation, in the relevant sense, does not require a preceding mental state with a content identical or very similar to that of an anticipated experience, at least not one that is phenomenologically accessible. In the case of the flame, there is just the immediate bodily anticipation of harm—that is where things stop: "the chain of reasons has an end" (PI, 326). Wittgenstein notes that the term "expectation" can serve to mislead here. In some but not all contexts of use, "expecting *p*" is suggestive of a preceding mental state with the content *p*. However, we also talk of "expecting" in situations where there are no occurrent thoughts at all, where our expectation is integral to an unreflective experience of unfolding events:

> I watch a slow match burning, in high excitement follow the progress of the burning and its approach to the explosive. Perhaps I don't think anything at all or I have a multitude of disconnected thoughts. This is certainly a case of expecting. (PI, 576)

Wittgenstein adds that expectations like this are not atomistic in nature. Our pre-reflective practical and perceptual expectations are instead "imbedded" in larger situations, integral to larger patterns (PI, 581).[6]

[6] More generally Wittgenstein maintains that "expectation" is not a univocal term. We talk about "expecting" in various different situations, giving rise to confusion when we fail to differentiate contexts of use (PI, 577). He also addresses this theme in the earlier *Blue Book*. However, the latter text does not include the theme of indeterminate anticipation. Instead, Wittgenstein takes feelings or "sensations" of expectation to be exhausted by non-intentional feelings. When we refer to these as the expectation that *p*, he maintains that *p* is not an object of expectation but a name given to the feeling (Wittgenstein, 1969a, p.21).

One might think of an indeterminate expectation as an attitude with a fairly general content, which is compatible with several different scenarios but incompatible with others. However, I want to endorse a stronger form of indeterminacy: whether or not *q* amounts to the fulfilment of expectation *p* is not always determined beforehand by something contained within *p*. Before we actually experience something as the fulfilment of *p*, there may have been no fact of the matter. Consider the following remark: "It is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact" (PI, 445). This might be taken to indicate that expectation and its fulfilment are essentially linguistic in nature. However, I think Wittgenstein is instead pointing to an illusion that we are drawn to by language, especially written language. A temporally extended anticipatory process is represented in a synchronic way by packaging its outcome as the content of an earlier-held propositional belief. The sentence "I expect that *p*" conveys the impression of a thought content that is fully present (an observation that applies similarly to "I can or ought to do *p*"). So, when expectations are set out in this manner, they appear to specify the conditions of their fulfilment. However, Wittgenstein's reflections are suggestive of the alternative position that the anticipation-fulfilment relation is diachronically structured and irreducible. Whether or not we ought to experience something that is said, done, or observed as consistent with pre-reflective expectation is not fully specified in advance.

Of course, we can appeal to numerous instances where expectations are laid out very specifically before they are fulfilled. Nevertheless, the wider practice within which they are embedded does not take that form. What we have instead is a groundless, variably determinate, practical confidence, which is—for the most part—unperturbed by the manner in which events unfold. If this is right, then it points to a twist on the traditional problem of induction. Instead of worrying about what grounds we have for expecting that *p* (or, for that matter, how we distinguish our expectation that *p* from an expectation that *q*), we arrive at the question of what grounds there are for believing we had the expectation that *p* in the first place. Experiencing something as the fulfilment of a prior anticipatory process does not suffice.

4 Wittgenstein on certainty

This conception of indeterminate anticipation can be integrated with a reading of some of Wittgenstein's later remarks in *On Certainty* (although there is no reason to think that—taken as a whole—those remarks point unambiguously to any one position). By bringing the two texts together, we arrive at a conception of certainty as a dynamic, all-pervasive way of anticipating things, rather than an attitude of expectation with a circumscribed content. Consider the much-discussed notion of a "hinge", sometimes referred to as a "hinge proposition". Familiar examples include the likes of "I have two hands", "the Earth has existed for a long time", and "there are other people". The common theme is that whatever such statements might express is implicit in a context of practice, where it cannot be intelligibly doubted. It is debatable how hinges should be conceived of—as entrenched propositions, grammatical rules, nonconceptual practical attitudes, and/or beliefs of some sort. It is also debatable whether there are different types of hinges, some more entrenched than oth-

ers.[7] However, for current purposes, we can remain agnostic over the specific nature, scope, and variety of hinges. I want to address something different, something that is obscured by an overemphasis on hinge certainty.

Whatever hinges might be, when we are pushed to articulate them, we tend to do so in terms of propositions with differing contents. Even if it is accepted that hinges themselves are non-propositional, references to different contents remain suggestive of there being many different hinge certainties at work in our lives. However, in addressing certainty, I think Wittgenstein also seeks to identify something else, something *singular*. It is not a matter of however many hinges but instead the precondition for our being able to accept anything as a hinge. Pritchard (2012, p.267) appeals to the notion of an overarching "über hinge commitment", which has the propositional content "one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs". More specific hinge commitments, he suggests, "codify" this. While it is right to emphasize the singularity of our underlying certainty, what I have in mind is quite different. It is not an attitude of whatever kind with propositional content. Instead, it is a non-localized practical orientation, which is amenable to phenomenological description. Its scope extends to all aspects of our lives, including our beliefs, our various expectations, how our surroundings appear, what we mean, and what ought to be said and done.[8] Our underlying certainty consists in a diffuse sense that, as we engage with our surroundings, the immediate and longer-term future will unfold in navigable ways. Only with this form of anticipation in place can anything become an unquestioned condition of practice in any domain. To *have* certainty is thus to be capable of acquiring certainties.

This conception of certainty is consistent with some of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*, but not all of them. At some points in the text, it seems that certainty consists in whatever cannot be intelligibly doubted within a context of shared practice. For example, although I may doubt that my train will arrive on time, doubting in this same situation that trains even exist would amount to a "mental disturbance" (OC, 73). Within different frameworks of certainties, different doubts might well be intelligible, but—to a large extent—these frameworks are stable and shared. As Wittgenstein remarks, we distinguish truth from falsehood against an "inherited background", and any localized doubt we might entertain thus "presupposes certainty" (OC, 94; 115).

However, Wittgenstein is also concerned with something else: a condition for taking anything as certain in this manner. At one point, he writes that the "difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" (OC, 166). It is the nature of this groundlessness, and the source of the associated difficulty, that I want to focus on. The point is not just that certainty, like rule-following, is embedded in our practice in ways that do not and cannot depend on some form of determinate grounding. When Wittgen-

[7] For discussion of differing accounts of hinges in *On Certainty*, see, for example, Moyal-Sharrock (2007), Hamilton (2014), and Coliva (2016).

[8] To some extent, the position set out here complements that of Moyal-Sharrock (2007, 2021). In particular, her conception of basic or primitive trust as an all-enveloping attitude could be identified with having certainty. However, I am not sure whether Moyal-Sharrock would distinguish having certainty from hinge-certainties in the way that I do. In addition, her account does not emphasize the role played by uncertainty or the associated phenomenology.

stein refers to groundlessness, he is also concerned with a certain general attitude that is integral to our believing and, indeed, to all aspects of our experience and practice. It is captured by this remark: "My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things" (OC, 344). "Acceptance", in this context, does not involve taking however many specific things to be the case; it is not just a matter of accepting *p*, *q*, and *r*, while allowing *s*, *t*, and *u* to remain in contention. Instead, it is an overarching attitude towards uncertainty—we are not *troubled* by the indeterminacy of our anticipation, by how things might unfold.[9] We do not ordinarily go looking for determinacy and reassurance; we allow the possibilities to remain open and we also experience subsequent events as broadly in line with our expectations.

If this is right, then Wittgenstein's remark complements his reflections on expectation in *Philosophical Investigations*. Both concern a pre-reflective way of anticipating things. Indeed, the theme of indeterminacy and its dynamic resolution is also to be found in *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein writes that, as we come to believe something, "light dawns gradually over the whole" (OC, 141). An important difference is that, in *On Certainty*, expectation is not a localized attitude but an underlying orientation that encompasses all aspects of our lives. From moment to moment, and also in the longer term, we anticipate things in a certain general *way*. There is no singular way of expressing or communicating this, as it spans the procession of experiences, our practical expectations, our own actions and their consequences, how others are likely to act, and even what we mean by our words as we say them. As such, it includes the epistemic, the moral, the practical, and the semantic.[10] Only with this in place can anything operate as a certainty for us. To have certainty is to *not* feel the itch or the urge to scratch; it involves being generally untroubled by what remains indeterminate, uncertain, unpredictable, and by how things unfold over time.[11]

We can thus see why an experience of lacking certainty is challenging to identify and articulate. First of all, it concerns something that is by its very nature pre-reflective, a condition of our thought and practice rather than a contested aspect of our

[9] In discussing Blankenburg's position, Mishara (2001, p.320) makes the complementary observation that common sense involves *not* requiring "certitude in the proper domain of the merely probable".

[10] In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein employs the terms "Gewissheit" and "Sicherheit", both of which are translated as "certainty". While *Gewissheit* might be thought of in terms of theoretical certainty, *Sicherheit* has connotations of safety and security. When we conceive of having certainty in terms of non-localized, confident anticipation, we can see how certainty in all contexts involves what we might call a sense of *security.* Hence, these connotations of "Sicherheit" are not incidental to Wittgenstein's reflections. Complementing this, Blankenburg observes that loss of natural self-evidence involves lacking a "natural feeling of security [*Geborgenheit*]" (Blankenburg, 1971/2012, p.82).

[11] This gives us a way of reinterpreting John Wisdom's discussion of the "neurotic", who keeps checking that the tap is turned off or the door is locked even though they "know" full well that this is so (Wisdom, 1964, p.172). When we return to the house in order to check that we locked the door, even though we *know* that we did, what is lacking is certainty, where having certainty is to be distinguished from knowing something. Similarly, the philosopher who remains epistemically troubled, despite having exhausted all possible epistemic avenues, continues to have uncertainty—they cannot let things rest. In fact, the very ground they seek consists in a tolerance for the kind of uncertainty that they refuse to tolerate. This is in keeping with a remark in Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*, where he writes that "the ground on which we stood and which appeared to be firm and reliable was found to be boggy and unsafe". Commonsense is indeterminate, and certain philosophical problems arise when we strive to impose precision. When we "revert to the standpoint of common sense", this indeterminacy no longer troubles us (Wittgenstein, 1969b, p.45).

lives. Second, this underlying certainty does not have any particular content, instead comprising an all-pervasive way of approaching life's uncertainties. Third, the sense of certainty has an essentially diachronic structure and so cannot be identified with anything that is fully present at a particular moment—a quale or *feeling* of certainty. Fourth, given that it spans all aspects of theory and practice, it can be articulated in many different ways. For instance, it could be expressed through the likes of "I can go on", "it'll work out", "I'll find my way through this", "I'll figure it out", "there won't be any nasty surprises", and so forth. It could equally be referred to in terms of confidence, trust, hope, and also faith, all of which relate to how we meet uncertainty.

Wittgenstein expresses dissatisfaction with his own characterizations. At one point, he refers to certainty as a "form of life" but adds that this turns out to be "very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well" (OC, 358). However, he continues to emphasize the primitive, non-propositional nature of certainty. For instance, he indicates that it involves a kind of practical anticipation, something "animal", something possessed even by a "creature in a primitive state" (OC, 359, 475). There is also a hint that certainty need not concern anything in particular. It is not an attitude with a specifiable content, of a kind that could be deemed true or false, accurate or inaccurate. Certainty does, he says, *consist in* a kind of "attitude", but it is not an attitude towards the truth of anything in particular (OC, 404). Having certainty is more like knowing one's way about than taking something to be the case. It is comparable to having one's bearings in a familiar city, something that does not require having all of the relevant information at any given time. Much of what happens in our lives is not fully specified in advance. Being able to go on is—to a large extent—a matter of *how* we approach this.[12]

5 The Phenomenology of anticipation

Wittgenstein's approach is complemented by writings in the phenomenological tradition that address what I take to be this same aspect of experience, albeit from a different philosophical perspective. Furthermore, the two can be brought together in an informative way. To be more specific, we can draw on a crucial distinction made by Husserl in order to refine our understanding of the contrast between certainty and uncertainty. One might worry that Wittgenstein and phenomenology are not natural bedfellows, given Wittgenstein's general unease about appeals to experience.[13] However, he does not object to phenomenological talk per se. Furthermore, some

[12] As these observations might suggest, a closely related concept is that of "orientation". We could say that having certainty involves having an underlying *orientation* through which to encounter and navigate uncertainty. In an interesting and wide-ranging study, Stegmaier (2019) takes orientation to be fundamental and unanalyzable, something that we invariably presuppose. Construed in that way, it approximates *having certainty*. Orientation, or being able to find one's way, is also a more general theme in Wittgenstein's writings. For instance, he writes that "a philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (PI, 123). Thanks to an anonymous referee for reminding me of this remark.

[13] See Kuusela et al., (2018) for helpful discussion of Wittgenstein's changing attitudes towards phenomenological philosophy, and of various points of complementarity between themes in his writings and work in the phenomenological tradition.

of his remarks can be interpreted as critical of a tendency to misconstrue temporally organized patterns of anticipation and fulfilment as momentary qualia with ineffable ingredients. Consider this passage:

> We could also imagine a case in which light was always seeming to dawn on someone—he exclaims 'Now I have it!' and then can never justify himself in practice.—It might seem to him as if in the twinkling of an eye he forgot again the meaning of the picture that occurred to him. (PI, 323)

Here, Wittgenstein does not want us to construe "dawning" in terms of something already determinate, which moves closer to or further from our cognitive grasp in a way that we somehow measure with feeling. But his remarks remain consistent with an alternative conception, whereby dawning involves variably specific patterns of anticipation coalescing over time. The relevant *feeling*, I suggest, consists in a dynamic sense of something becoming increasingly determinate, in ways that involve the progressive fulfilment of prior anticipation. Similarly, where something fails to dawn, this is not a matter of something that is already fully formed evading our grasp.

At one point, Wittgenstein challenges the view that expressions such as "the word is on the tip of my tongue" refer to a special kind of experience. In so doing, he remarks that having something on the tip of one's tongue is no more an "expression of an experience" than "now I know how to go on" (PI, Part II, p.219). To this, we can reply "exactly!" But it is not an invitation to deny that there are such experiences, and Wittgenstein perhaps errs at this point. What we instead need is a different conception of them. And it is here, I suggest, that work in the phenomenological tradition proves especially informative. In different ways, both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty develop the view that human experience as a whole is structured by organized patterns of bodily anticipation and fulfilment, which accommodate occasional doubts and uncertainties. Once such an approach is adopted, we can take "now I know how to go on" to involve a distinctive kind of experience without sliding into unqualified and unhelpful talk of qualia and the like.

Consider a position set out by Husserl in writings later brought together as *Experience and Judgment* (Husserl, 1948/1973).[14] According to Husserl, all experience involves an intricate interplay between anticipation and fulfilment. Most often, we anticipate things in the guise of certainty. Take the example of a wine glass falling from a table onto a hard surface. It is with certainty that we anticipate hearing a certain noise and seeing it break. In other words, no *competing* possibilities present themselves as it falls. In contrast, as we see a moving body in the water near the shore that we first take to be a seal, a competing system of anticipation may form as we approach—perhaps it is just a rock. Our initial sense of certainty is thus undermined by doubt. Husserl maintains that certainty and doubt are not simply rival patterns of anticipation, otherwise on a par with one another. Certainty is more basic: it is presupposed by the possibility of doubt but not vice versa (Husserl, 1948/1973, p.100). For something to be experienced in the form of doubt, it must stand out as potentially anomalous or discrepant, and it can only do so relative to a larger pattern

[14] See also Husserl's passive synthesis lectures (Husserl, 2001).

of anticipation and fulfilment that remains cohesive and unchallenged. According to Husserl, doubt often involves a form of anticipation that is bodily, practical, and non-conceptual. However, the point also applies to explicit, linguistically formulated doubts, which similarly show up relative to larger contexts of practice.

Importantly for current purposes, Husserl draws a distinction between experiences of "problematic" and "open" possibility or uncertainty. Open uncertainty is ubiquitous in pre-reflective experience and compatible with sustaining a sense of certainty. It is just a matter of our expectations being indeterminate; numerous eventualities are equally compatible with their fulfilment. For instance, when I leave my house in the morning, I do not specifically expect to see a red car drive past, someone delivering post, a labradoodle being taken for a walk, or a pigeon standing on a wall. Nevertheless, none of these scenarios run contrary an indeterminate but confident pattern of expectation, one that similarly accommodates many other possibilities. As Husserl (1948/1973, p.96) puts it, "what is intentionally prescribed in the apperceptive horizon of a perception is not possible but certain. And yet possibilities are always included in such prescriptions, in fact, whole series of multifarious possibilities". In contrast, the sight of an elephant walking past or a human body lying on the street would appear immediately incongruous and surprising; we were not open to those scenarios in the same way.

However, our expectation can also take another form, by incorporating "problematic" uncertainty in addition to open uncertainty. Here, we do not experience a single, cohesive pattern of anticipation that is consistent with multiple outcomes. Alongside it, a conflicting and competing pattern of anticipation takes shape. Husserl offers the example of approaching a shop window and seeing what we first of all take to be a person. However, a specific doubt then emerges—perhaps it is just a mannequin (1948/1973, p.92). Here, an original pattern of confident anticipation is challenged by a competing pattern that is equally integral to one's current perceptual experience; the figure *looks* ambiguous. Subsequent resolution of this ambiguity could involve fulfilment of the original pattern of anticipation ("it is a person after all") or alternatively its negation ("it was not a person"). In this example, one's initial certainty is undermined by a specific doubt—it could be this thing rather than that thing. However, competing patterns of anticipation can have varying degrees of specificity. One might have a less determinate sense that "perhaps it is not as it seems", "something is not right here", or "it might not turn out as expected". Where a unitary pattern of expectation is undermined in this manner, what we have is not merely open uncertainty (or indeterminacy), but also a sense of "problematical" or "questionable" possibility (Husserl, 1948/1973, p.95).

A single, indeterminate pattern of expectation that is open to many different eventualities can thus be distinguished from an experience involving two or more competing patterns of anticipation. Only the former proceeds "unbroken" or "unobstructed", retaining the "mode of naïve certainty" (Husserl, 1948/1973, p.96). So, certainty is not simply to be contrasted with uncertainty; the appropriate contrast is with "problematic uncertainty". Furthermore, having certainty is a *precondition* for more localized experiences of problematic uncertainty. It consists in a general orientation, incorporating the ongoing, default expectation that indeterminate patterns of anticipation will be followed by a sense of fulfilment, that experience and

activity will progress in cohesive ways with only occasional, localized ambiguities and anomalies arising.

Distinguishing open from problematic possibility / uncertainty in this way enables us to avoid linguistic confusions concerning the relationships between certainty and uncertainty, which otherwise make certain claims seem counterintuitive or even contradictory: "certainty is a way of encountering uncertainty"; "certainty is the acceptance of uncertainty". Having certainty is incompatible with a predominance of problematic uncertainty and unfulfilled expectation but not with open uncertainty, which is ubiquitous and inescapable. Drawing on Husserl's discussion of the anticipatory structure of experience also enables us to better appreciate how losses of certainty involve changes not only in the experience of anticipation but also in how we experience our current surroundings. How things currently *look* to us is partly a matter of the possibilities they are imbued with, many of which take the form of immediate anticipation or "protention" (Ratcliffe, 2015, 2017). So, when open uncertainty is replaced by a predominance of problematic uncertainty, everything looks somehow different in a nonspecific way—competing sets of possibilities cling to things and elicit perceptual activities that might resolve ambiguities.

Hence, having certainty is not a specific attitude or the content of any such attitude, regardless of whether we appeal to propositional attitudes, bodily intentionality, or anything else. It is a diffuse form of anticipation that envelops our attitudes in general. This is also captured nicely by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), who refers to what Husserl calls the underlying mode of "certainty" as a universal "style" that all of our experiences and activities are embedded in.[15] As with the distinctive style of a particular person (something that is singular, diffuse, and dynamic), the overall structure of practically engaged experience has a style—a pattern of unfolding in which all of our experiences and thoughts participate (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p.345). I take this to be consistent with Wittgenstein's remark that certainty "is *as it were* a tone of voice in which one declares how things are" (OC, 30). For Wittgenstein, as for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, certainty is not something discrete that we somehow possess but something integral to how we do things in general, how we go about things. It spans our reflective and pre-reflective expectations, perceptual experiences, bodily activities, interpersonal relations, thoughts, and utterances.

6 Disturbances of certainty

By drawing on themes from Wittgenstein and the phenomenological tradition, I have set out how *having certainty* consists in a non-localized attitude or *style* of anticipation, amounting a tolerance of uncertainty. It involves a combination of (i) open uncertainty and (ii) experiencing unfolding events as consistent with prior anticipation. Having certainty can be contrasted with a preponderance of more rigid styles of anticipation, which are open to a much narrower range of eventualities. In the latter scenario, problematic uncertainty predominates—what might have been consistent

[15] See Cerbone (2017) for some complementary but wider-ranging remarks on the theme of indeterminacy in Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty.

with a less determinate pattern of anticipation now takes the form of a competing possibility. Having certainty is also to be contrasted with experiences that involve a pervasive sense of anomaly and discrepancy. Given that the diachronic structure of anticipation and fulfilment is primitive, what constitutes fulfilment is not fully determined by the content of preceding anticipation.[16] Even so, the two aspects of experience complement and feed off one another. Narrower patterns of anticipation, involving a sense of competing possibilities, are less likely to be followed by experiences of fulfilment. Conversely, the persistence and prevalence of unfulfilled expectation will elicit patterns of expectation that are more cautious or conflicted.

I have not said what exactly an *experience* of fulfilment consists of. Perhaps, in the majority of instances, it is best characterized negatively, as the absence of any experience of anomaly, discrepancy, or surprise. Whatever the case, when we reflect on the certainty that underlies our practice and the sense of being able to "go on", this is where we hit bedrock. There comes a point where, as Wittgenstein would say, "this is simply what I do" (PI, 217). Importantly, though, talk of bedrock and the like should not be construed in terms of solid foundations. As an attitude towards uncertainty, having certainty consists precisely in the pre-reflective, practical acceptance of our irrevocably lacking any such foundation. It is a groundless attitude towards uncertainty that operates as a condition for our being able to take anything for granted, for our lives to include the "obvious".

Hence, we sustain certainty through a degree and kind of openness to uncertainty. This openness is also practically oriented; it involves an ongoing sense that we will keep finding our way and be able to go on when presented with new possibilities. In English, it is commonplace to say of a situation, "don't worry, it'll work out".[17] Something akin to this characterizes pre-reflective expectation in general, including not only longer-term expectations but also the moment-to-moment flow of anticipation and fulfilment. To have certainty is to know one's way about and to continue expecting things to unfold in a manner that is largely unproblematic, which need not involve having all the details to hand at any one moment.[18]

Mundane, everyday changes in our experiences of anticipation and fulfilment concern specific sets of expectations, relating to transient or longer-term situations. However, other experiences involve shifts in the general style of anticipation, in the overall structure of experience. Various different perturbations of phenomenological style occur in different contexts, all of which incorporate the loss, diminution, or distortion of underlying certainty. The common theme is that there is more to uncertainty than ceasing to accept however many things. In addition to this, there is a change in the overall orientation through which we experience and engage with uncertainty. The alternative to certainty is not just however many uncertainties; it is strangeness, unfamiliarity, disorientation, and perplexity. But this can take various

[16] Forms of experience that are said to involve "salience dysregulation" could be construed in these terms. Things seem strange, unfamiliar, and significant in incongruous ways, but in ways that need not involve conflict with the specific content of a preceding anticipatory experience (Ratcliffe & Broome, 2022).

[17] In Austrian German, there is an utterance with similar connotations, "es geht sich aus", which translates literally as "it goes itself out".

[18] Wittgenstein also refers more specifically to *language* as a "labyrinth of paths", which can involve "knowing your way about" from certain directions but not from others (PI, 203).

qualitatively different forms, accommodating Blankenburg's emphasis on phenomenological changes typical of schizophrenia and much else besides. Losses of certainty can be more pronounced in certain broad areas of one's life than in others. There is a difference between the "certainties" that are taken for granted in a broad area of one's life and the overall style of anticipation characteristic of that domain—the *having of certainty* that is required to sustain those certainties. To venture a provisional taxonomy, we can distinguish disturbances of anticipatory style that relate primarily to the domains of (a) one's own bodily processes; (b) one's actions and abilities; (c) the surrounding environment; (d) other people; (e) the contents and general reliability of one's own experiences and thoughts; (f) which kinds of intentional attitudes one is undergoing—whether one is thinking, remembering, imagining, or perceiving.

For example, Havi Carel proposes that serious chronic illness often involves a loss of *bodily* certainty, which relates primarily to (a) and (b) but also concerns (c) and (d).[19] In its place, one experiences "bodily doubt", a wide-ranging loss of "faith" or "background confidence" in the operations of one's body. Carel refers to this in terms of "tacit sets of beliefs we hold about our bodies", which could be construed as hinges. However, she also refers to a "trust" that we have in our bodies (Carel, 2013, pp.191-2). The latter, I suggest, is better construed in terms of the kind of certainty identified here than in terms of however many hinges. Open uncertainty concerning the ongoing operations of one's body is replaced by a preponderance of problematic uncertainty. This amounts to a qualitatively different way of experiencing one's body, its operations, and one's actual and potential activities, something that further disrupts open uncertainty in other areas of life that depend on bodily certainty.

Others have considered losses of certainty involving (e) and (f). For instance, Morley (2003, p.93) addresses our grasp on the nature of our own intentional states by appealing to themes in Merleau-Ponty's work and, in particular, the importance of a "tolerance for ambiguity". He focuses specifically on the phenomenological boundaries between perception and imagination, noting that some degree of vagueness here is generally accepted. Indeed, it is precisely by accepting it that we succeed in managing the phenomenological boundaries between imagining and perceiving. In my terms, by subjecting experience to greater scrutiny and requiring more determinate distinctions, we shift the balance between open and problematic forms of uncertainty, such that previously innocuous patterns of unfolding now appear ambiguous and troublesome. Experiences of this nature, Morley suggests, are associated with certain psychiatric conditions.[20]

As for losing certainty over the contents of one's own experiences and thoughts, it is arguable that upheavals such as bereavement disrupt established practices and patterns of anticipation in such a way that previously unproblematic utterances, lin-

[19] For a complementary analysis that applies Carel's conception of "bodily" doubt to the social realm, see Roberts and Osler (2024).

[20] As noted by Morley (2003), this relates closely to what R. D. Laing calls "ontological insecurity", the loss of a more usual orientation through which one accepts and negotiates life's "hazards" (Laing, 1960, p.40). See Ratcliffe (2017) for a wider discussion of how disruptions of anticipatory style can erode one's sense of the distinction between types of intentional states such as perceiving, imagining, and remembering. See also Rhodes and Gipps (2008) for the view that certain kinds of delusions are attributable to disturbances of Wittgensteinian "bedrock".

guistic thoughts, and concepts may be undermined and ambiguated. For instance, the connotations of "home" might be very different in the absence of a particular person. Thoughts such as "I will be home shortly" are both fulfilled and negated by the anticipation of walking into a house that one now occupies alone—I am home now, but how can it be "home" without her? The sense of what it is to be at home is ambiguated and rendered problematic (Ratcliffe, 2022, Ch. 4).

A helpful concept when considering various different experiences of losing certainty is that of "hyperreflexivity", as set out in several of Louis Sass's writings. Hyperreflexivity includes forms of involuntary reflection, whereby ordinarily unproblematic aspects of experience and thought fall under scrutiny and consequently appear unfamiliar and strangely conspicuous (e.g., Sass, 2003, 2007, 2014).[21] We can think of this as an attentiveness that narrows the scope of anticipation, generating both problematic uncertainty and an increased sense of anomaly. It involves a general sense of tension, wrongness, conspicuousness, unfamiliarity, and lack of coherence. Like Blankenburg, Sass is concerned primarily with phenomenological changes that characterize schizophrenia. However, many other circumstances involve something structurally similar—an attentiveness that undermines; an inability to let things be and to trust that one or another aspect of experience or activity will unfold unproblematically. It comes down to how much uncertainty we tolerate and are untroubled by.

Phenomenological differences between losses of certainty are thus attributable in part to which domains are primarily affected and the degree to which problematic uncertainty and unfulfilled expectation predominate. They further depend on what is at stake—which kinds of *significant* possibilities are disrupted and the specific way in which they are disrupted. For instance, possibilities for goal-directed activities could be undermined by a sense of their potential inappropriateness, likelihood of failure, or even seeming impossibility. Possibilities for interpersonal connection could be undermined by the pervasive prospect of indifference, betrayal, shame, humiliation, or physical harm. One's bodily abilities could be undermined by external threats or threats from within. And so forth. Hence, the overall style of anticipation is susceptible to numerous different changes, all of which involve the undermining of certainty.[22]

Of all the domains in which certainty might be eroded, I suggest that the interpersonal is most central. As Wittgenstein writes, "in order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind" (OC, 156). In other words, our certainties are established by and embedded within shared practices.[23] But there is also another way in which having certainty depends on the interpersonal and the social.

[21] Elsewhere, Sass provides a detailed comparative study of Wittgenstein and Daniel Paul Schreber, in order to explore the parallels between certain kinds of philosophizing and a form of madness. Again, an important theme in his discussion is that what we ordinarily take for granted can be transformed phenomenologically by its being made conspicuous (Sass, 1994).

[22] Having certainty is therefore integral to but not exhaustive of what I have elsewhere termed "existential feeling", a changeable sense of reality and belonging that is presupposed by more localized experiences, thoughts, and activities (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2015).

[23] Complementing this, Blankenburg (2001, 1971/2012), emphasizes how commonsense is inextricable from the "intersubjective constitution" of the experiential "world".

Suppose we no longer trust our bodies, lose confidence in our abilities, encounter our surroundings as uniformly threatening, or find our own experiencing and thinking somehow problematic. Even as we face quite radical changes in the overall style of experience, there may remain the prospect of turning to others for direction, guidance, reassurance, and support. The sense that things will work out, that we'll be able to find our way, often depends on the enduring expectation that others will support us should we falter. One way of putting it is to say that our relations with other people comprise a distinctive form of "scaffolding" that we sometimes continue to draw upon with confidence as we navigate upheaval in other areas of life (Ratcliffe, 2022, forthcoming).

A pre-reflective, wide-ranging "trust" in others is a prerequisite for turning to them when we no longer know how to go on. This trust, which plausibly originates in childhood, is integral to our tolerance for uncertainty. With the sense that others remain dependable and predictable, our acceptance of uncertainty increases. We come to habitually rely on them to show us the way from time to time, to fill in the gaps (Ratcliffe, 2017, 2022). This reliance also amounts to a nonlocalized feeling of safety or security. As Morley (2003, p.100) puts it, "through the examples of our childhood caretakers we come to consent to the fragile uncertainty of the world". Complementing this position, Blankenburg quotes from a letter by one patient with a schizophrenia diagnosis:

> Your experience of protection and security, your being unburdened or your happiness are all indebted to something in relation to which you are barely conscious. It is this something which enables the being unburdened as well as these other things. It is what forms the first foundation. (Blankenburg, 2001, p.308)

Blankenburg takes common sense—and the grasp of obviousness that comes with it—to be something bodily, practical, and affective that is acquired in early childhood. He refers to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1963/1995) on the developmental importance of "basic trust", while also observing that it is first observed in the development of language (Blankenburg, 2001, p.310).

If this is broadly right, then the loss of a confident or "trusting" style of interpersonal anticipation is especially pernicious. It involves losing something that is required if we are to accept and negotiate uncertainty in other domains of life. In a world where others appear only in the guise of indifference or threat, there is nobody to catch us if we fall, to guide us when we are lost, or to reassure us when we doubt ourselves. Hence, the interpersonal is not just one domain within which we might have or lack certainty; it also plays an important regulative role in sustaining and restoring certainty more generally. If a trusting style of interpersonal anticipation remains, so does the prospect of recovering certainty or, at least, of continuing to navigate areas of uncertainty. However, where other people appear unpredictable, untrustworthy, no longer dependable, or even threatening, our resources for negotiating uncertainty and recovering certainty are substantially diminished. We are doubly lost—lost without a guide.

In conclusion, then, I have sought to show how we can integrate insights from Blankenburg, Wittgenstein, and Husserl, in order to identify and conceptualize an

elusive but pervasive form of certainty and what it is to lose this. To have certainty, in the relevant sense, centrally involves accepting a form of uncertainty. Patterns of anticipation are generally open to a range of scenarios and experienced as unfolding in ways that accord with expectation. Losses of certainty involve combinations of (a) overall styles of expectation that are less tolerant of indeterminacy and thus more likely to be undermined by competing possibilities, and (b) an increased prevalence of unfulfilled expectation. I have suggested that this broad conception can aid us in interpreting various experiences, all of which involve diminishments or losses of certainty. Of central importance is what we expect from other people in general, given that the prospect of turning to others for support or guidance contributes to the sustenance and restoration of certainty in all areas of life.

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