

The Genesis of *On Certainty*

1. Wittgenstein's last notebooks

On 21 July 1949 Wittgenstein set sail for the USA on the *Queen Mary* to visit his friend and erstwhile pupil Norman Malcolm, who had invited Wittgenstein to stay with him in Ithaca, where Malcolm taught philosophy at Cornell University. While there, Wittgenstein gave a public talk at the Cornell philosophy department and engaged in numerous philosophical discussions with Malcolm's teacher Oets Bouwsma, Willis Doney, Max Black, Stuart Brown and John Nelson. He also met Cornell graduate students on two consecutive evenings to talk about verification and about knowledge. He had brought with him a typescript of his recent work (presumably the now lost TS 234, made from MS 144, which is printed in the fourth edition of the *Investigations* as *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*), which he proposed to read together with Malcolm. However, this seemed too restrictive to Malcolm, and instead they began discussing Moore's 'Proof of an External World' and his 'A Defence of Common Sense', on which Malcolm had had an exchange with Moore. The discussions proved fruitful for them both (for Malcolm's account of these discussions, see Appendix 6). Indeed, they provided the stimulus for one theme that was to preoccupy Wittgenstein in the final phase of his life.¹

The notes and notebooks written during this period are referred to as Wittgenstein's 'last writings'. They are catalogued as MSS 170–7, all written

¹ To be sure, Wittgenstein had engaged with Moore's April 1939 address to the Cambridge Moral Science Club entitled 'Certainty', in which Moore had defended the view that sense-experience statements, such as 'I am in pain', are certain, and that they are certain in the same sense as some material-thing statements. To this Wittgenstein objected vehemently, advancing the view that finds its mature expression in the *Investigations*' non-cognitive account of avowals (PI §246; cf. PPF §315). This, however, is *not* the concern of his reflections in *On Certainty*, which has altogether different and novel issues in its sights.

between late 1949 and Wittgenstein's death on 29 April 1951. MS 169 occupies an intermediate position. It is a large undated notebook, purchased in Dublin, of 162 alternately numbered pages. Most of this text was written before Wittgenstein went to the USA. Much of it consists of materials that went into the composition of TS 234 (*Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*). But the entries towards the end of the MS were evidently written after Wittgenstein's return from the USA and some of these are directly relevant to his reflections on Moore and do indeed mention Moore by name. I have collected these remarks in Appendix 1, which consists of MS 169, 71r–76r. Dating the last writings is highly problematic, for it seems clear that Wittgenstein sometimes switched to a new notebook without having completed a prior one and subsequently switched back according to convenience – his reasons for doing so will be explained below. The only fragment that undergoes reworking is a segment of the notes on colour in MS 176. Why Wittgenstein redrafted these remarks is not known.

Wittgenstein had fallen ill towards the end of his sojourn with Malcolm. He returned from America at the end of October 1949, feeling exceedingly unwell. He was diagnosed by the Trinity College physician Dr Bevan on 25 November 1949 as suffering from prostate cancer. Hearing that his sister Hermine was dying of cancer, he flew to Vienna on 24 December to be with her in the family home in the Alleegasse. He concealed the fact that he himself had cancer. Hermine died on 11 February 1950. It was while he was in Vienna that he began reading Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colour*), which stimulated him into writing extensive notes on colour, one of the three topics that occupied him in the final part of his life. Wittgenstein left Vienna on 23 March 1950 and returned to London for a few days before going to Cambridge to stay with von Wright. It was at the end of April 1950 that Wittgenstein's interests turned again to the subject of the Inner and the Outer, which had so preoccupied him while writing the *Investigations* and the subsequent *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment* and the extensive writing on the philosophy of psychology. This constitutes the second theme of his last writings. The third theme was the subject of doubt and certainty, knowledge and belief, stimulated by his conversations with Malcolm on Moore's papers mentioned above.

It should be noted that the treatment for prostate cancer at the time consisted of a combination of oestrogen (a female hormone) to try to reduce the growth of the tumour and X-ray. Wittgenstein felt that the treatment made it impossible for him to think clearly, and there is indeed a six-month period, between the end of September 1950 and early March 1951, in which he ceased to write. He resumed writing only when the treatment was abandoned and he was able to think clearly again in the final weeks of his life.

2. *Alternative publication plans*

It is noteworthy that most of the notebooks written after his return from the USA were in his possession in Dr Bevan's house when he died. So they were among the first items with which his literary executors became familiar. Among the executors the most enthusiastic supporter of the project of publishing these late manuscripts was G. H. von Wright, Wittgenstein's pupil, friend and successor in his Cambridge chair. Already in 1954 von Wright publicly announced that plans were afoot to publish Wittgenstein's last writings.² However, other publications took precedence, in particular *Philosophical Investigations* (1953); *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1st edition, 1956); *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958); *Notebooks 1914–1916* (1st edition, 1961); *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (German edition 1964); *Zettel* (1967); as well as some occasional pieces. It was not until 1969 that *Über Gewißheit* (*On Certainty*) was published. Its publication in the form it took was largely driven by G. E. M. Anscombe against von Wright's judgement.

By January 1962 von Wright had produced a transcript of the late manuscripts which were then available (MS 172 was discovered only in 1964). A generous grant from the Rockefeller foundation had made possible the photographing of some of Wittgenstein's manuscripts, which were then bound into hard-cover volumes. Among them are three sets (one for each of the executors) of two hard-covered volumes, referred to as 'The Omega Volumes' ('Omega' signifying final). Von Wright's transcript of the Omega Volumes was supposed to function as the foundation for collaborative work with Anscombe on the last writings. By August 1967 he had a volume of *Last Writings* together with a draft preface.³ He sent the preface to Anscombe for her approval.⁴ On 29 May 1968, he wrote to Henry Schollick, editor at Basil Blackwell publishers, saying that his typescript was "ready for printing" and that he was waiting for Anscombe's response to his proposal. Von Wright's edition was, it seems, divided into three parts: (i) The Inner and the Outer; (ii) Colour; (iii) Knowledge and Certainty. However, the

² According to Lassi Jakola, von Wright announced this in the very first, Swedish publication of his memorial essay 'Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Biographical Sketch', published in *Ajatus* 18 (1954), 5–23.

³ The title von Wright chose had the merit of not begging any questions about the thematic unity or diversity of the contents.

⁴ All the following information about the aetiology of the text is due to the philological research of Lassi Jakola, 'G. H. von Wright's Unpublished Edition of Wittgenstein's "Late Writings": Editor's Preface and Other Materials, ca. 1967–8', *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 10 (pp. 51–95), as well as an unpublished 'Draft for an Editorial History for Wittgenstein's Last Writings'.

editing was extensive. It was organized thematically, and consequently obscured the manner in which the various themes were interwoven and continuous. Furthermore, it was selective, rather than comprehensive.

However, Anscombe in effect blocked von Wright's edition, declaring that she was "against a scrappy publication" (presumably meaning the multiplicity of distinct themes in von Wright's proposed edition). She argued that the literary executors had "a single treatise on a single topic to put before the public" – namely a treatise on certainty. In September 1968, she wrote peremptorily to von Wright "I went ahead with the certainty thing as a monograph on its own, as I always wanted it to be. I hope you will agree that this was right." The latter sentence was not a request. Anscombe in effect took von Wright's edited material on certainty, making it into a monograph, deferring publication of the material on colours and on the Inner and the Outer.

Strikingly, von Wright came round to thinking that Anscombe was right. He wrote to her on 10 March 1969,

I am now *completely convinced* that you were right (against me) in insisting that the writings on certainty should be published as a book on its own. The impression it makes is strong and wonderful – in spite of a certain repetitiveness and occasional 'drops' to levels of not so high quality.

However, it is of interest to discover that in the late 1980s von Wright changed his mind again. He had come to think that Anscombe's publication distorted the character of Wittgenstein's late writings and his preoccupations in the last period of his life. In 1988, von Wright supported an initiative by Suhrkamp Verlag to publish a special facsimile edition of all the last writings on the centenary of Wittgenstein's birth. At that time, he wrote to Rhees, "I think it of real interest to see and to read the material in toto in its original arrangement." Unfortunately, the initiative was abortive.

3. *Anscombe's edition*

What Anscombe did was to select materials from the last writings that fitted her conception of a treatise on certainty. It consisted of the following extracts:

OC §1–§65 = MS 172, 1–20

OC §66–§192 = MS 174, 14v–40

- OC §193–§425 = MS 175, 1r–78v (the complete notebook)
 OC §426–§523 = MS 176, 22r–46r
 OC §524–§637 = MS 176, 51v–80v
 OC §638–§676 = MS 177, 1r–11 (the complete notebook)

Each selected remark was assigned a number for convenience of reference. Pages 46r–51v of MS 176 were excluded by Anscombe as they are concerned with certainty and doubt in connection with the Inner and the Outer, and they did not fit her idea of a monograph on certainty. She omitted all but one of the remarks flanked by two vertical strokes. As noted in the Editorial Preface, she also cut out many of Wittgenstein’s horizontal separating lines and added some of her own.

To this edition Anscombe composed a preface in English. This preface incorporates a number of falsehoods. It asserts that the book “contains the whole of what Wittgenstein wrote on this topic [of certainty] until his death”. But this is untrue, as is evident from Appendices 1–5, which consist of remarks written at the time that Anscombe had omitted, presumably because they are concerned with certainty and doubt with respect to ascription of experience to others (and hence to the topic of the Inner and the Outer).

Anscombe’s preface further asserts that the material falls into four parts: §1–§65; §66–§192; §193–§299; §300–§676. This seems mistaken. It is virtually impossible to impose a clear chronological order upon the last notes, as Wittgenstein evidently switched from one notebook to another according to availability (i.e. which notebooks he had with him on his manifold wanderings during this period) and convenience (small notebooks and the reporters’ spiral-bound notebook (MS 171) could fit into his pocket and could be used when he was going for walks).

Certainly §1–§65 are a single continuous piece of writing, and the first series of remarks consequent upon his discussions with Malcolm. They were written on six large-format sheets of foolscap (MS 172), each folded in half to produce four pages (i.e. twenty-four in total). These seem to have been obtained in Vienna in early 1950. Four of its twenty-four pages are on colour; the other twenty pages are §1–§65 of what we now know as *On Certainty*. All these pages were left in Anscombe’s house in Oxford after Wittgenstein’s sojourn there, but it is not clear when precisely they were written. The four pages on colour were probably written in Vienna, where Wittgenstein was reading Goethe’s *Theory of Colour* in the last weeks of

1949 and early 1950.⁵ But it is unclear when the remarks on Moore and certainty were written.

§66–§192 were written in MS 174, 14v–40 in the spring to summer of 1950 (it is a large 88-page notebook, only forty pages of which are inscribed). It contains only one date a few pages in: 24 April 1950.

§193–§425 were written in a single large notebook, MS 175. It is 180 pages long, but it was written in two distinct periods, interrupted by six months in which Wittgenstein felt unable to write due to the effect upon him of the oestrogen with which he was being treated for his prostate cancer. So pages 1r–34v (corresponding to *On Certainty* §193–§299) were written up until 23 September 1950, and pages 34r–79 (corresponding to *On Certainty* §300–§ 425) were written between 10 March 1951 and 21 March 1951.

MS 176, 22r–46r⁶ corresponds to *On Certainty* §426–§ 523, after which Anscombe excised pp. 46v–51v, which, though continuous with the antecedent remarks and written at the same time, are concerned with knowledge, doubt, and belief regarding the Inner and the Outer. Anscombe's edition (without indicating any break) continues with MS 176, 51v–81 (i.e. the whole of the rest of the notebook), corresponding to *On Certainty* §524–§ 637.

The final remarks of the book, *On Certainty* §638–§676, were written in a further notebook MS 177, pages 1r–11 of which Wittgenstein filled in during a three-day period of writing from 25 April 1951 until 27 April 1951, two days before his death.

A further misrepresentation in the preface is in the final paragraph, in which Anscombe wrote,

it seemed appropriate to publish this work by itself. It is not a selection; Wittgenstein marked it off in his notebooks as a separate topic, which he apparently took up at four separate periods during this [sic] eighteen months. It constitutes a single sustained treatment.⁷

⁵ In a letter to Rhees, dated 22 January 1950, written from Vienna, he writes, "I have been reading again parts of Goethe's 'Farbenlehre' which attracts and repels me. It's certainly philosophically interesting and I've been thinking about it and even written down some weak remarks." Six days earlier, he had written to Malcolm, "I am not writing at all because my thoughts never sufficiently crystallize." This suggests that the four pages on colour were written between 17 and 22 January 1950.

⁶ MS 176, 1–22r is concerned with colour and is printed in *Remarks on Colour*.

⁷ Preface to the 1969 edition of OC (p. vie).

But it is a selection and Wittgenstein *did not* mark it off in his notebooks as a separate topic.

Anselm Müller, then a visiting scholar from Freiburg working on his PhD and studying with Anscombe, translated the preface that Anscombe had written in English.

4. *The New Edition*

The task of editing Wittgenstein's last writings was, at the time, an onerous one. His literary executors were eager that their much-admired teacher be recognized and acknowledged as the foremost philosopher of the age. Producing what the Germans call a "critical edition" of the complex sequence of last writings would not have served that purpose. However, there can be little doubt that Anscombe's edition was distorting and confused readers about the nature of Wittgenstein's philosophical thought in the final phase of his life. He was not writing a final monograph on the nature of knowledge and belief, doubt and certainty. The three different themes that preoccupied him are interwoven, and obscuring this fact does no more than generate misunderstanding. It was perhaps unfortunate that the subsequent Suhrkamp Verlag proposal of publishing a facsimile edition in 1989 never came to fruition.

The present edition began its life as a joint project between Joachim Schulte and myself. Having worked together on the fourth edition and translation of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we resolved to work together on *On Certainty*. It was our intention to include various addenda; indeed, they were planned to be more extensive than in the current edition. We worked intensively together from 2015 on the translation of Anscombe's text and went over much of that together in a number of meetings in Zurich and Oxford. However, the work was brought to a hiatus by personal obligations that Joachim had to discharge, and subsequently by his ill health. Our joint labours were, in effect, terminated by the pandemic, as it became obvious that the kind of intense cooperative work that is necessary was not possible over the internet. I was left with a wide range of drafts in various stages of completion.

In 2024, having completed a variety of projects, I was casting around for something fruitful with which to occupy myself. Coming across the very large pile of typescripts in a drawer, I thought it would be unfortunate if all the labour that we had put into it would come to nothing. I approached Joachim with the proposal of my continuing the work on a

more modest scale than originally intended. With great generosity he gave me permission to use the materials we had jointly produced before the project collapsed. My debt to him is great, in particular for his meticulous editing of the German text of *Über Gewißheit*. I hope that the present edition is qualitatively commensurate with his generosity.⁸

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⁸ I am most grateful to Lassi Jakola not only for his remarkable philological research on Wittgenstein's last writings and the history of their publication, but also for his invaluable comments and corrections to an earlier draft of this preface.

Abbreviations

BB	<i>The Blue and Brown Books</i> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958)
BT	<i>The Big Typescript</i> , ed. and tr. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005)
LSD	‘The Language of Sense-Data and Private Experience’, in James Klagege and Alfred Normann (eds.), <i>Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951</i> (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), pp. 290–367 (page reference to original pagination in <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , vol. 7, 1984)
LW	<i>Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology</i> , vol. 2, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)
MS/MSS	manuscript/s
NB	<i>Notebooks 1914–16</i> , ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979)
OC	<i>On Certainty</i>
PI	<i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)
PPF	<i>Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment</i> (previously known as <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , Part II), published in <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , rev. 4th edn, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)
PR	<i>Philosophical Remarks</i> , ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975)
RFM	<i>Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics</i> , ed. G. H. von Wright, Rush Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, rev. edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978)
TLP	<i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961)
TS/TSS	typescript/typescripts
ÜG	<i>Über Gewißheit</i>

