Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Swansea, Wales, September 1947Ben Richards

The following notes on the politics of rising uncertainty and the future of democracy were prepared for the inaugural CISS global forum, Peace and Security under Uncertainty, Quarantine Station, Sydney, April 28 2017. The remarks were inspired by a remarkable set of 676 aphorisms known as On Certainty (Über Gewissheit). These jottings were made by the Vienna-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein during the final 18 months of his life, on the move, from Ithaca to Vienna and Oxford, from mid-1949 to his death – 66 years ago today – on April 29 1951.

Although nobody can be certain, there seems to be growing public agreement that our planet and its peoples have entered a new era of great uncertainty. Drawn by such forces as big-power militarism, war, environmental destruction, economic stagnation, deepening inequality and populism, the tides of uncertainty appear to be rising. Some observers even speak of a great regression towards catastrophe, a return to the world of the 1920s and 1930s fuelled by widespread feelings of disquiet and fear that the future will yield only threats, rather than new opportunities to live well.

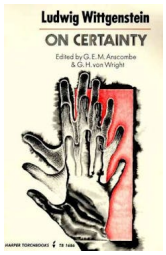
These claims about a new age of uncertainty are themselves dogged by doubts. When seen historically, for instance, it's quite uncertain whether, and to what extent, the new uncertainty exceeds or even matches previous periods of calamity. Is our era really comparable to the great disruption and turbulence of the first half of the 20th century, with its economic crises, dissolved empires, democratic collapse, totalitarianism and catastrophic global wars? Or how do the uncertainties of our age compare with the great religious turmoil of the late medieval and early modern period, masterfully analysed by Jean Delumeau : the fears of damnation and death mobilised by the church and compounded by episodes of military violence, famine, disease and the widespread belief in witchcraft and other forces of magic?

We don't really know how to respond straightforwardly to these challenging, unsettling questions. When comparing whole epochs, it's not clear how best to classify let alone measure the experience of uncertainty. Even the definition of uncertainty remains uncertain. That should come as no surprise, for only lived experiences unaffected by the flow of time can be defined

with any certainty. So we could say that uncertainty is a fickle character, a moody challenger of certitude and a capricious tormentor of human conviction. That is a key reason why Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Über Gewissheit) continues to be a living masterpiece, a deservedly classic work that remains highly relevant for our times.

Everyday life

On Certainty is a text that can plausibly be interpreted as an anthem against the human will to certitude and mastery of the world. Most obviously, it reminds us that uncertainty is an intimate, everyday matter. There is a personal dimension of the experience of not knowing exactly who we are, what our world is and where both we and our world are heading. Big talk of global spikes and planetary spectres of uncertainty is one thing. Daily living with uncertainty is another.



We typically cope with uncertainty by setting it aside and hiding away from it. We imagine it has no grip on our daily lives. We hedge ourselves with certainties. We build nests of predictability. Whatever doubts we harbour, we do so on the basis of supposing things to be fixed, certain, settled. "The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty," wrote Wittgenstein (115). Just as a child "learns by believing the adult" and suspending doubt, which "comes after belief" (160), so in our daily lives all of us arm ourselves with unshakeable beliefs and cocoon ourselves within language-shaped practices that we suppose to be indubitable, "true" and morally "right". "I act with complete certainty," remarks Wittgenstein. "But this certainty is my own." (174)

We doze, pillow talk, spring from our beds the same side each and every morning. We sit on the toilet; wash our faces, peer in the mirror at our bodies while brushing our teeth. We boil kettles, make tea, drink coffee, kiss loved ones goodbye, catch buses, walk, mount our bicycles, send text messages, scan breaking news, say good morning, daydream before wielding the word "absolutely" in our first morning conversations. Certainty is our mantra against lost bearings, but it is not just a practical remedy for confusion and disempowerment: certainty is a condition of possibility of our being-in-the-world.

Language games

A second pertinent insight provided by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* has to do with his thoughts on the contingent and fabricated quality of certainty. By thinking with and against the Cambridge Apostle defender of "here is one hand, here is another" common sense
G.E. Moore
, Wittgenstein points out in these aphorisms that the word certainty (Gewissheit) and its family of terms are fixated on a set of meanings that include determined, not variable, reliable, sure (Latin:
certus
: settled, sure), not to be doubted, established as a "fact", or (more strongly) as "truth". Consoling and comforting they all may be, but all these words serve to obfuscate the anchored, embedded, thoroughly contextual and contingent quality of what we take for granted, or agree upon.

"Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement [Anerkennung]," (378) says Wittgenstein. The thought is radical: what we take to be true, factual, evidence-based, certain and incontrovertible is always and everywhere anchored, positioned and defined within a "language game". Though he does not say things this way, Wittgenstein in effect revives a now-obsolete verb from the early 16th century: to certain, which means to make certain, or to certify something as beyond doubt. The point is that all truth claims are assertions made from within the confines of a given language game. What counts as evidence and "the facts", and all testing, confirmation and disconfirmation of truth claims based on "evidence" and "the facts", takes place within the scaffolding (Gerüst) of a language game (105). "The reason why the use of the expression 'true or false' has something misleading about it," Wittgenstein notes, "is that it is like saying 'it tallies with the facts or it doesn't', and the very thing that is in question here is what counts as 'tallying' [Übereinstimmung]." (199)

Certainty about ourselves and the world derives from our efforts to make things certain, to certify them. Evidence is adduced. Facts are artefacts. Truth is claimed. Certainty is fabricated, and it thus has a time-bounded quality. "When language-games change," he wrote, "then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change." (65; 256) It follows that "what men and women consider reasonable alters", says Wittgenstein. "At certain periods, men and women find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa." (336)

Nothing is forever. Uncertainty, the twin of uncertainty, cannot be banished from human affairs. Not even taxes and death are certain, we could say. Although Wittgenstein doesn't put things this way, truth claims, paradoxically, stir up doubts about truth. Truth is a contaminant of truth. Its yearning for certainty calls into question things that are taken for granted. Nothing is certain but the uncertainty of the unforeseen. Hence Wittgenstein appeals for greater humility about what we know, or suppose we know. He asks us to imagine language games in which an

understanding of “knowledge” and even the word “know” are entirely absent (443; 562). (Think of the Pitjantjatjara peoples of central Australia, who use a family of terms such as mula, mulapa, mula-mula, mula-mulani to describe speaking honestly as synonymous with convincing someone of something and asking them in the same breath whether they agree.) Wittgenstein also calls on all believers in evidence, facts and truth to acknowledge the contingency of their own assertiveness. “Suppose it were forbidden to say ‘I know’, he wrote, so that we were "only allowed to say 'I believe I know’?” (366)

Democracy

There’s another noteworthy insight to be found within the aphorisms of *On Certainty*: Wittgenstein’s conviction that the “groundlessness [Grundlosigkeit] of our believing” (166) poses a great difficulty for our era, especially for those professions and organisations committed to the gathering of evidence and the pursuit of fact-based truth. Rephrased in more nuanced terms that go well beyond his limited political horizons, we could say that the special challenge is to live our lives with a tolerable measure of certainty all the while recognising that our different and various ways of being-in-the-world are groundless, in the sense that they are without ultimate foundations and, hence, haunted by uncertainty.

There’s a French proverb that runs *rien n’est sûr que la chose incertaine* (nothing’s certain but uncertainty). This could easily be a motto for democracy. Considered as a political form and as a whole way of life, democracy is like no other. All hitherto existing political forms, as well as the emerging Russian, Turkish and other despotisms of our day, try to handle uncertainty by attempting to annihilate it. For instance,
tyranny
imposes certainty through tough public order measures that have the unintended effect of triggering disquiet among its subjects and (as Lucian’s famous tract on the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris
reminds us) endless sleepless nights for the ruler who grows afraid of plots, assassinations and popular rebellion.
Oligarchy
supposes that the ruling few can quell their infighting and rule in calm unison by leaving their loyal subjects to cope “in peace” with their existential uncertainties.
Monarchy
is a form of God-given government guided by a different formula for deciding, on the basis of blood lineage and pregnancy, who should rule, and how accession from one ruler to another takes place.

Measured in terms of the uncertainty problematic, democracy is different, and unique. Considered ideally as a form of self-government of people who treat each other as equals, it is

the only political form that publicly admits of uncertainty as well as enables people to deal constructively with its potentially damaging effects. The old complaint about democracy, that it puts power in the hands of ignorant "commoners" who then behave like the foolish swine of Gadara, is unconvincing.

In practice, democracy depends upon institutions that provide secure lifeboats in seas of uncertainty: written constitutions and rule of law procedures; timetabled elections; sitting parliaments; integrity watchdogs; public service bureaucracies and media platforms. By means of these and other institutions, democracy thus enables people and their representatives to spot and deal with the sources of destructive uncertainty, like reckless military adventures, gang violence and market failures, including risky and fool-headed efforts to monetise uncertainty using such financial instruments as derivative securities, indemnities and catastrophe bonds.

Democracy also whips up uncertainties. Adam Przeworski long ago reminded us that in matters of policy making democracy "institutionalises uncertainty", but the drivers of this uncertainty are not just party competition and periodic elections. It is the public openness, institutional pluralism and continuous public scrutiny of arbitrary power typical of democracy that enable individuals, groups and whole organisations to question and overturn the supposedly "natural" order of things. Fallibility is a guiding principle of democracy. When it works well, democracy casts doubts on what Wittgenstein called "complete conviction, the total absence of doubt" (194).

Democracy tutors people's sense of pluralism. It has quantum effects. It robs reality of its reality, which is why political smoke and mirrors and lying are deemed unwelcome. Democracy serves reminders that "truth" rests upon acknowledgment, and that "truth" has many faces. It tempts citizens to think for themselves; to see the same world in different ways, from different angles; and to sharpen their overall sense that prevailing power relationships are not "natural", but contingent.

We could say that democracy triggers a long-term mood swing, a transformation of people's perceptions of the world that Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* manages to capture well. The metaphysical idea of an objective, out-there-at-a-distance "reality" is weakened; so too is the presumption that stubborn "factual truth" is superior to power.

The fabled distinction between what people can see with their eyes and what they are told

about the emperor's new clothes breaks down. Especially under media-saturated conditions, when vibrant democracies are marked by dynamism, pluralism and an entangled multiverse of competing stories told about how the world works, "information" ceases to be a fixed category with incontrovertible content. What counts as information is less and less understood by citizens and their representatives as "brute physical facts" (John Searle), or as chunks of unassailable "reality". Quantum weirdness gets the upper hand. What is called "reality", including the "reality" promoted by the powerful, comes to be understood as always "reported reality", as "reality" produced by some for others, in other words, as mediated messages that are shaped and re-shaped and re-shaped again in the process of transmission. Reality is multiple and mutable, a matter of re-description and interpretation – and of the power marshalled by wise citizens and their representatives to prevent particular interpretations of the world from being forced down others' throats.

The curse of uncertainty

It may be thought that all of the king's horses and all the king's men are unlikely to reverse this fallibilist trend. Wittgenstein seemed to think so; once it takes grip on people's lives, uncertainty about certainty is irreversible, or so *On Certainty* implies. We should be less certain.

Democracy requires wise citizens and wise representatives: experienced and humble people who know they don't know everything, and who therefore are suspicious of those who think they do, especially when they try to camouflage or enforce their arrogant will to power over others. But there have been many times in the past when the political form known as democracy destroys wisdom in this sense. When things go well, democracy provides spaces and mechanisms for people to define with some certainty their own insecurities. When things go badly, democracy does the opposite: it produces feelings of uncertainty that grip millions of people, sometimes with decadent effects.

Pressured by outside forces and internal weaknesses, democracy stumbles, paralyses its own workings, produces an excess of uncertainty. Democracy is cursed by uncertainty. It nurtures feelings that there's too much confusion and too little relief. It begins to be ripped apart by uncertainty, catapulted into chaos. External discomfort and internal confusion feed upon each other. The decadence gives heart to wilful fantasists sure of their ground. Power mongers armed with their Big Truth pounce. Loud-mouthed people who "talk rather more about certain things than the rest of us" (338) say they can put an end to uncertainty. Citizens who have lost their bearings pay attention. The old 17th-century proverb then applies: "He that leaves certainty and sticks to chance, When fools pipe he may dance." That is the moment when the tyrant, the fascist or the populist despot makes their appearance and offers their poisonous gifts to the confused, the perplexed sufferers of unbearable uncertainty.

In our times, described by some as a new age of uncertainty, might the moment of popular submission to grand certainties once again be heading our way?

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez campaigning in Caracas, 2012.Reuters/Jorge Silva

This column article is part of the Democracy Futures series, a joint global initiative with the Sydney Democracy Network . The project aims to stimulate fresh thinking about the many challenges facing democracies in the 21st century.

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