

## Peer Pressure<sup>1</sup> and Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

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### Abstract

In the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, old conventions have been thrown away as illusions, and new ones reign in their place. It seems as if all the obvious things that have been taken so far are fiction, and those that will be taken from now on have always been true. This strangeness is clearly illustrated by the habit of wearing face masks. Wearing a mask now seems to be part of the uniform necessary to be considered 'a sensible citizen'(良識ある市民). My question is this: how does wearing a mask mean that one is being a sensible citizen? To consider this, I would like to examine Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (abbreviated as OC). My focus is on how Wittgenstein's world-pictures (represented by Moorean propositions, such as 'Here is one hand, and here is another', 'The earth existed for a long time before my birth', 'I have never been far from the earth's surface) look plausible. If Wittgenstein's ideas are used successfully, we can proceed with an analysis of why wearing a face mask seems plausible, then can examine how peer pressure occurs.

### 1. Wearing a mask to be 'a sensible citizen'

Face masks are designed to keep the virus (if you have it) from spreading to others. In Japan, however, it has a social implication. Wearing a face mask seems to have been an implicit compulsion from the first, even when it was not known how effective it actually was as a corona virus countermeasure. Wearing a mask now seems to be part of the uniform necessary to be considered 'a sensible citizen'<sup>3</sup> in the same way as men's suits or women's pumps<sup>4</sup>. Besides, two local phenomena confirm the social meaning attached to face masks.

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<sup>1</sup> 「同調圧力 (Dōchō atsuruyoku)」 in Japanese.

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<sup>3</sup> In Wittgenstein's wording, we can find similar expressions such as 'a reasonable man' (OC 19), 'a/the reliable man/person' (OC 21, 22), 'intelligent adult' (OC 85).

<sup>4</sup> Demand for face masks is still very high in Japan. (Cf. T. Shimazu and K. Watanabe, "Face mask craze crashes Japan's online stores", in: *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 30, 2020)

Firstly, in an early phase of the epidemic, many people bought up surgical masks and resold them at higher prices<sup>5</sup>. If face masks only had an epidemiological (疫学的) function, why people behaved in such a way is unexplainable. In terms of infection control, it is not wise to form a long line to buy a box of masks (it might make more sense to stay at home). Secondly, the Japanese government decided to distributed two cloth (sometimes unsanitary<sup>6</sup>) masks to each household. This decision, although its efficiency as a policy was unclear, proves that even the state took the social meaning of face masks seriously.<sup>7</sup>

Even now, wearing a face mask in a public space is an implicit obligation. At the very least, it is mandatory to wear a face mask in service and retail sectors. One possibly negative effect of wearing a mask in Japan is that it can cause heat stroke in conditions of high temperature and humidity, but it is still regarded as essential.

The face mask is not only useful from the epidemiological viewpoint of disease control but also as an item that can impart confidence in a person. What I would like to examine in this presentation is what forms this sort of confidence. The meaning of face masks is consequently re-interpreted before and after the coronavirus pandemic. How does wearing a mask turn to mean being a sensible citizen?

To consider this issue, I would like to examine Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. My focus is on how Wittgenstein's world-pictures (represented by Moorean propositions,<sup>8</sup> such as 'Here

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07:22 JST. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Face-mask-craze-crashes-Japan-s-online-stores>)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H. Ito, "Japan to outlaw reselling of face masks online to stop profiteering", in: *The Asahi Shimbun*, March 6, 2020 at 15:01 JST. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13191571>

H. Matsumuro, "West Japan exec arrested for allegedly scalping 16,000 masks", in: *The Mainichi*, June 2, 2020. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200602/p2a/00m/0na/009000c>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Kamihigashi and S. Akiyama, "Japan gov't to distribute masks as planned despite discovery of bugs, hair, mold", in: *The Mainichi*, April 22, 2020. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200422/p2a/00m/0na/013000c>

<sup>7</sup> The situation in the United States is highly contrast to that in Japan. The one side, some states, e.g. California and New York, mandate wearing face masks in public, and some people strongly oppose this order. On the other side, there is no need to make it mandatory to wear face masks in Japan because of penetrated peer pressure.

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to generalize the relationship between Wittgenstein's world-pictures and Moorean propositions. Moorean propositions are a set of propositions in his two papers (1993). Wittgenstein, on the other hand, produces other sentences what we take for granted besides what Moore gives. In a narrow sense, the world-pictures should be limited

is one hand, and here is another', 'The earth existed for a long time before my birth', 'I have never been far from the earth's surface') look plausible. We may not accept the world-pictures as a given, but rather, we temporarily assume that we are 'simulating'<sup>9</sup> to make them credible. This attempt does not suggest that we could reject the world-pictures arbitrarily. On the contrary, it illuminates how the world-pictures are treated as having authority.

Some readers might argue that Wittgenstein's world-pictures should not be easily compared to a sentence, such as 'a person should wear a face mask in public'. But given that common sense can and does change in ways beyond our imagination, it is not outrageous to use Wittgenstein's arguments to reflect our actual problem. If his ideas are used successfully, we can proceed with an analysis of why wearing a face mask seems plausible, then can examine how peer pressure occurs.

## 2. Our object of comparison: Moyal-Sharrock's 'basic certainties'

In this section, we focus on world-pictures appearing in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* as 'an object of comparison' (PI 131) in order to consider peer pressure. '(A)n object of comparison', here, is a criterion adopted to highlight similarities and differences between some types of matter. However, Wittgenstein's world-pictures are not organised in such a way that we can immediately treat them as an object of comparison. We could refer to the 'basic certainties' discussed in D. Moyal-Sharrock's 'Wittgenstein on knowledge and certainty' (2017) where the author does not use the term 'world-pictures' but instead presents her own expression 'the basic/fundamental certainties'. This way of expressing it appears to mean that there is some epistemic account induced by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. According to Moyal-Sharrock's conception, the basic certainties that show what we depend on are different from empirical propositions that can be true or false, in depth, they cannot be such propositions. The basic certainties are manifested at the level of human (one kind of animal) behaviour. Surveying her ideas, we would like to obtain 'an object of comparison' (PI 131) to clarify the certainty of the sentence 'a person should wear a face mask in public' in later sections of this paper.

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to specific examples given by Wittgenstein. However, if we don't disregard whether all they can be called propositions or not, then we can include Moorean propositions in Wittgenstein's world-pictures.

<sup>9</sup> This word is the English translation of the German word *beucheln* at §203 in *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol 1. 'Simulate/*beucheln*' in the late Wittgenstein seems to be an important clue in considering his methodology. In the future, I would like to analyse the words 'simulate/*beucheln*' and also the related words 'pretend' and 'feign'.

Before introducing Moyal-Sharrock's conception of the basic certainties, it is necessary to examine what the world-pictures are. A brief summary provided by A. Hamilton can give an overview of what Wittgenstein's world-pictures are.

We can therefore summarise Wittgenstein's account of Moorean propositions and world-pictures as follows.

- (i) The unquestioned acceptance of Moorean propositions underlies our ordinary methods of enquiry.
- (ii) These propositions are not a priori foundations for knowledge, but are implicit in the formation of particular empirical beliefs and in our general picture of the world.
- (iii) They are grounded in, and manifested by, our actions and behavior, rather than formulated explicitly.
- (iv) Their truth is not learned in isolation – we frame them, and form the conviction that they are correct, only through reflection on our general picture of the world.
- (v) Our world-picture is inherited, and is neither true nor false, neither grounded nor ungrounded, neither rational nor irrational.
- (vi) Moorean propositions do not amount to philosophical claims, though there may be a vague boundary with the latter. (Hamilton, 2014, p. 147.)

Hamilton seems to be trying to portray the both constancies and variabilities of the world-pictures as frameworks of our knowledge. We cannot afford to scrutinise every single issue. What we need to acknowledge is the third point, 'They are grounded in, and manifested by, our actions and behavior, rather than formulated explicitly.'

The reason for focusing on Hamilton's third point is that it appears to be useful for eliciting the meaning of Moyal-Sharrock's basic certainties. Although she didn't use the term world pictures here, I would state that whether or not the world pictures can be recognised as propositions distinguishes her reading from other researchers. She seems to admit the world-pictures can be codified (e.g. 'I believe that I had great-grandparents, that the people

who gave themselves out as my parents really were my parents'<sup>10</sup>) but never that they can be treated as having truth value, so to speak, as empirical propositions. Contrasting some researchers like A. Coliva and D. Pritchard, Moyal-Sharrock strongly resists the idea that Wittgenstein's world-pictures expressing 'basic certainties' can be provided as propositions.<sup>11</sup>

It can be argued that for Wittgenstein, for a sentence to be a proposition, it must be susceptible of truth or falsity (see AWL 101; PLP 288; BT 61 [76]). And in as much as basic certainties are neither true nor false – 'the ground is not *true* nor yet false' (OC §205) – they cannot, on Wittgenstein's view, be propositions. Indeed, one passage in *On Certainty* leaves no doubt as to the non-propositionality of our fundamental certainties: 'the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true' (OC §204). (Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, pp. 555–6. Italics is original emphasis.)

For Moyal-Sharrock, the seemingly empirical nature of basic certainties is only an inconsistency which will be eventually rejected.

So why does Wittgenstein, in other passages, refer to our fundamental beliefs as 'propositions'? The inconsistency is partly justified by the fact that the non-propositionality of basic certainties is not immediately clear to Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, and so out of philosophical habit and in reference to Moore's 'propositions,' he calls these certainties 'propositions.' Of all the insights Wittgenstein comes to in *On Certainty*, basic beliefs being ways of acting (and not propositions striking us as true) is the most groundbreaking, and must therefore have been the most difficult to achieve and process. (p. 556)

The notion that the basic certainties appear to be propositions is, according to Moyal-Sharrock, merely 'philosophical habit'. This concept, in her words, is 'the general resistance

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<sup>10</sup> OC §159. Moyal-Sharrock also quotes this passage in 'Wittgenstein on knowledge and certainty' (2017), p. 548.

<sup>11</sup> Some papers by Moyal-Sharrock show that her position is consistent. (Cf. Chap. 2 'The nonpropositionality of some 'propositions'' and Chap. 9 'Certainty as trust: Belief as a nonpropositional attitude' in *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (2007), a paper 'Unravelling certainty' (2007), especially section 4 'Objective certainty as a non-propositional attitude', pp. 84-87.)

of epistemologists in admitting the “animal” into their midst’ (p. 556). Referring to Pritchard’s argument, she encourages us to struggle against this ‘philosophical habit’ and grasp Wittgenstein’s consideration as an exploration of our non-propositional belief.

On my reading, basic certainties are non-epistemic, non-propositional, unjustified certainties that can only manifest themselves as ways of acting. These ways of acting in the certainty of  $x$ , can be philosophically rendered as grammatical rules or as non-propositional beliefs or beliefs-*in*, and this applies to all our basic certainties. Putting these certainties into words for the benefit of philosophical elucidation is a mere heuristic aid; it no more makes our certainties into propositions than the alleged codifications of a general hinge commitment [‘We are not fundamentally in error in our beliefs about the world’<sup>12</sup>] does. (pp. 557–8. The bracket is mine.)

The most important point for Moyal-Sharrock is that the basic certainties are manifested at the level of human (one kind of animal<sup>13</sup>) behaviour. In her argument, this can be said as well in the discussion of ‘grammatical rules’<sup>14</sup> that is at issue in the Wittgenstein study. She does not deny that the basic certainties can be written down, but calls it ‘heuristic aid’. This implies that if a person talks about the basic certainties verbally, it is the only means which can be used to gain insight into them.

### 3. What our reality promises: neglecting particularities

In order to compare the basic certainties that Moyal-Sharrock calls for, consider the sentence ‘one should wear a face mask in public’. If we regard the sentence as one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, p. 557.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Moyal-Sharrock, ‘The animal in epistemology: Wittgenstein’s enactivist solution to the problem of regress’, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Moyal-Sharrock does not give a detailed explanation of ‘grammatical rules’ in the same paper. Instead, she refers to S. Schroeder’s paper ‘Grammar and Grammatical Statements’ (2017) where he describes Wittgenstein’s grammar as ‘referring not to the actual workings of language, but to a systematic account of those workings’ (p. 258). It is interesting to consider how (in)consistent Schroeder’s statement is with Moyal-Sharrock’s. Schroeder probably thinks it is possible to systematise grammatical rules independently of our language practice. If this is the case, his idea would contradict the (Moyal-Sharrock’s) idea that grammatical rules appear in the midst of our linguistic practice. (I would rather support Moyal-Sharrock’s idea.)

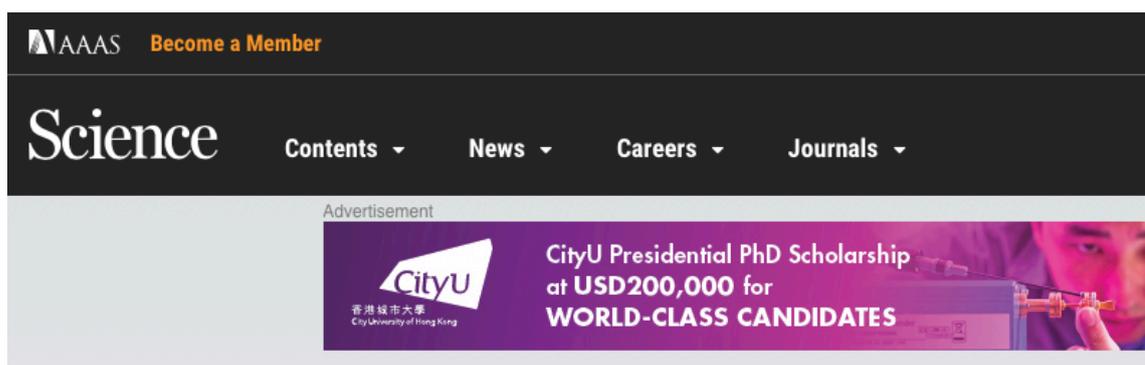
basic certainties and beliefs, on the one hand, we can say that we manifest confidence in this belief at the behavioural level. The preceding sentence is not justified, but it is trusted at the level of our action.

On the other hand, I doubt that there is no problem in regarding the sentence 'a person should wear a face mask in public' as one of the basic certainties. For if this sentence is one of the basic certainties, the expression 'should' would seem redundant. As long as the sentence contains 'should', we can act in a way that does not support the sentence, that is to say, we can express our mistrust of it. (In fact, we could go out without a face mask.) Naturally, I recognised that I should have introduced a sentence that doesn't contain 'should' from the start of this paper: 'a person wears a face mask in public'. However, this operation would not have much impact on the discussion here. The alternate sentence seems more like an empirical proposition than a codified basic certainty. If my doubt is appropriate, the sentence can be strengthened or rejected, and our behaviour in wearing face masks does not necessarily mean full confidence in the sentence. For example, we could weaken the

normative persuasiveness<sup>15</sup> of the sentence by saying, 'a person should give priority to avoiding crowds rather than wearing a face mask'<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> M. Kober states that 'My suggestion is that certainties are like the rules of games and belong to the constitutive rules of a (discursive) language-game. Certainties are neither true nor false, rather they define truth with regards to the epistemological aspects of a language-game (OC, 497)' (2018, c1996 p. 456). Following Kober, exploiting the concept of 'a language-game' may be useful to consider peer pressure of wearing face masks. The sentence 'a person should wear a face mask in public' could be treated as a rule working to test people on eligibility for a game, homogeneous society.

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The image shows a screenshot of the AAAS Science website. At the top left, there is a logo for AAAS and the text "Become a Member". Below this, the word "Science" is prominently displayed in a large, serif font. To the right of "Science" are four navigation links: "Contents", "News", "Careers", and "Journals", each with a small downward arrow. Below the navigation links, there is a section labeled "Advertisement". The advertisement is for the "CityU Presidential PhD Scholarship at USD200,000 for WORLD-CLASS CANDIDATES". It features the CityU logo (City University of Hong Kong) and a photograph of a person's face looking through a microscope.

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13K



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Concerns that crowded commuter trains in Japan would help spread COVID-19 have, so far, not been realized. EDGARD GARRIDO/REUTERS/NEWSCOM

The sentence 'People should avoid crowded places' is not likely to be treated as normative at the moment. Because crowded trains (around Tokyo) are still one of the familiar sights. (See the picture above.) However, you should not take a comment by a photographer for granted. The photographer, E. Garrido states that "Concerns that crowded commuter trains in Japan would help spread COVID-19 have, so far, not been realized" in the report "Japan ends its COVID-19 state of emergency". (The report is

Nevertheless, it is possible to treat the sentence 'a person should wear a face mask in public' partially as if it were the same as a basic certainty, even though it might be strengthened or rejected. In other words, it seems to be possible to remove the sentence in question from the context of justification and express trust in it at the level of action. And this assumption seems to explain the attitude we are taking towards the sentence well.

If codified basic certainties are something that are 'always' excluded from the context of justification, let me suppose that the sentence 'a person should wear a face mask in public' may be 'sometimes' excluded from the context of justification in certain cases. If my supposition is acceptable, why exactly is it that we take a sentence as being out of justification in particular cases? Why do we treat a sentence as reliable in particular cases?

The answer I am going to present here may appear paradoxical. That is, treating a sentence as credible implies not only that it is done in a particular situation *actually*, but that it *can* be done in other situations *possibly*, so to speak, it *can* be done in *any* new particular situations. Obviously, I will not equate all possibilities of behaviours. A large number of them would be mere imaginal and absurd. However, if a sentence is treated *once* as outside the scope of doubt (cf. OC 87), there is no reason to prevent the sentence from being treated the same way in other cases. In addition, when a sentence is taken out of the context of justification and treated as reliable in *any* particular cases, then particularities are more or less *neglected*.

It may seem a bit extreme for my proclamation to discuss the new (alleged) common sense. As mentioned in the previous section, the alternate sentence 'a person wears a face mask in public' is more like an empirical proposition that can be applied to individual situations to question the truth rather than basic certainties. However, I believe it is significant to make extreme claims here. This is because what we are concerned with in this paper is to acknowledge the incongruity and strangeness that exists with the new (alleged) common sense.

Strictly speaking, we are torn between a sense of familiarity with the new norm and a sense of incongruity. I acknowledge that it seems strange to adopt both two attitudes. One of these attitudes is trusting (presupposing) the sentence 'people wear face masks in public'

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written by other scientific writer, D. Normile, in: *Science*, May. 26, 2020, 12:45 PM.  
<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/05/japan-ends-its-covid-19-state-emergency>

Contrary to what Garrido pointed out, Japanese people (especially, residents of Tokyo and its environs) seem to be not unaware of the danger of crowded trains. Rather, it would be true that they are pressured to go to work by companies they work for, and must take trains while recognizing the danger.

unconditionally and always,<sup>17</sup> and the other is treating the sentence in the same way as any other empirical proposition that can be rejected for some reason. This dilemma is exactly our reality and the true character of peer pressure.

It is difficult for us to endure holding onto this reality and we are apt to disregard one of these attitudes. The following famous section by Wittgenstein is suggestive not just for interpreters of *On Certainty* but also for thinkers who care about such actuality.

[...] (I)f someone were to say 'So logic too is an empirical science' he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (OC 98)

As Wittgenstein suggests, we sometimes adopt a sentence as a subject of testing and at other times as a criterion of testing. What I would like to add here is that there are some sentences which make us uncomfortable when we are seized with a desire to fix the roles of such sentences. If we succumb to this temptation, we are abandoning our reality, and we are also losing what it promises. Let me say the following claim again as a caution, if a sentence is treated *once* as outside the scope of doubt, there is no reason to prevent the sentence from being treated *the same way* in other cases. The reason why the conception of 'the same way' appears to be established is that particular ways of handling sentences are more or less *disregarded*. What our reality promises is that we are neglecting particular ways of handling sentences.

At least for me now living in Japan, wearing a mask is a *touchstone* (試金石) of whether I am a cooperative citizen. It seems that whether or not a person accepts the sentence 'one should wear a face mask in public' *without any conditions*, determines whether or not he is a sensible citizen. If a person accepts this sentence *without any conditions*, in other words, if he/she wears a face mask even though he/she is at risk from heat stroke and has an allergy to fibre, he/she will be honoured as being a great citizen. However, if a person does *not* accept the sentence as correct *without any conditions*, in other words, if the person chooses not to wear a face mask when going out, the person is not counted as one of those citizens working together in a group to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

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<sup>17</sup> In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein says that 'This is how calculation is done, in such circumstances a calculation is *treated* as absolutely reliable, as certainly correct' (OC 39). Wittgenstein's suggestive italics encourage us to look at even the certainty of arithmetical calculations in terms of our behaviours in particular environments.

#### 4. Conclusion: uncovering alleged ordinariness

In this paper, we consider the social implications of wearing face masks on our actions. To this purpose, we focused on the basic certainties elucidated by Moyal-Sharrock as an object of comparison, and utilised a consideration of Wittgenstein's world-pictures to uncover how the new common sense is materialized. Our treatment of a sentence as plausible more or less disregards the way it is treated in individual cases. This conclusion is not necessarily negative because it is also a matter when considering creativity of new language-uses. However, as has been discussed here, there is a fear that in order to gain a guaranteed position in a group, it will be necessary to ignore the realities of ambivalence and individuality in the way in which a certain sentence is handled.

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