What Does Not Tremble Is Not Stable:
Three Philosophical Streams from the Spring of (Un)Certainty

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Abstract

The article proposes a phenomenological journey through three concepts of uncertainty – those of Blaise Pascal, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jan Patočka. The discussion focuses on the meaning of certainty and uncertainty and on the mutual relations between the two according to each philosopher. Adopting an embodied philosophical-poetic perspective enables the dialectical relations prevailing between these three conceptions to emerge, clarifying that, despite their differences, they share a deep attachment to the transcendent dimension of human existence. This dimension is described as “uncertain certainty,” implying attention to the quiver of absolute meaning dwelling within and beyond the movement of humans and the lifeworld.

Keywords


The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,

And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all the other stars in the loneliness.
We are all falling. This hand here is falling.
And look at the other one ... It's in them all.
And yet there is Someone, whose hands
Infinitely clam, hold up all this falling

Rainer Maria Rilke

This article seeks to unfurl landscapes, cross-check perspectives, and expose mutual relationships that, ordinarily, tend to remain hidden. This text does not aim to offer solutions to troublesome problems, in the way of philosophical pragmatism, nor to expose logical paradoxes and inner contradictions in the language mediating between us and our world, in the way of analytical philosophizing. The text aims to steer a course, to reflect what was seen and resonate what was experienced, to allow impressions to shift between words and silences, between pleasure and pain. It seeks to do so not only through the rational consciousness that illuminates what is with the light of knowledge but mainly through the embodied consciousness that experiences even in the abyss of darkness. Its writing mode, therefore, is also on the border between continuous linear language and one that allows itself to be fragmented in the repetition spiral. And thus, the proposed phenomenological analysis, which strives for truth about phenomena, braids winding threads of poetic and visual metaphors.

At the focus are three philosophical conceptions of the phenomenon of certainty and its absence, which I will present as three stations in our hazy route to the understanding of the phenomenon’s mysteries: the views of Blaise Pascal, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jan Patočka. These three approaches, while surfacing from the depths of the past, will meet through my interpretations of them. The background to the emerging relations between them is the COVID crisis that has shaken entire communities throughout the world and placed all of us in an ongoing state of uncertainty. The weaving journey suggested here is an invitation to an interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue. It can, however, also be interpreted as a call to action, if we can agree that the very exposure of the hidden can lead to changes in the visible realm of our living reality.

The starting point of the discussion is that certainty, as well as uncertainty, are experiences embodied within the “lived body.” Certainty implies not only a sense of knowledge or lack of doubt but mainly a physical experience – of stability, safety, and anchoring, while uncertainty is awakened in us when we are flooded by an experience of instability, disruption, and detachment. Given that certainty and uncertainty are, above all, experiences of the lived body, the three metaphors that will emerge from the discussion also bear a bodily-physical character, when the presence of the lived body is located at their center.

1 An Observatory

What would the cedar gain by shunning the wind? The wind rends its branches but, by the same token, stabilizes it. ... welcome are these pangs if they enable you to bring yourself to birth. For no truth is proved, no truth achieved, by argument.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher whose life stretched between 1623 and 1662 as a delicate string between the death of his mother when he was only three and the firmness of his father, a judge and later a tax collector, between frail health and strong attachment to the pillars of European culture, and between a rationalist concern with exact science and a deep emotional impulse to touch the mysteries of human existence – wrote at the end of his life:

This is our true state; this is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance. We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us, and vanishes forever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition, and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation

2 The concept of the lived body (Leib), familiar in phenomenology, originates in the writings of Edmund Husserl, who distinguished it from the notion of the body as object (Körper). See Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, vol. 2., trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), sections 35–42.

whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses.

Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinites, which both enclose and fly from it.\(^4\)

Pascal describes the human condition as a constant and painful fluctuation between two fundamental desires. One is the desire to touch the “great” all-encompassing infinite, in the total sense that enables and constitutes the order of the world. The other is the desire to inquire into the most minuscule components of all that is, namely, to touch the infinite underlying everything. Similarly, we cannot truly grasp the time dimensions beyond the present – the future and the past – and we must admit that the present too, in its expansive richness, remains largely obscure to us. None of these yearnings can be realized because life itself, embodied within the limitations of a ceaselessly changing finite existence, “gets in the way” of our touching eternity and infinity. And so, we find ourselves like shaken leaves in the wind, unable to hold on to any certainty, to stand on stable ground or to establish a direct and indubitable connection with the invisible or, alternately, to live unaware and free from the torment of not knowing.

For Pascal, then, uncertainty is a product of our limited sight and of the finitude of human reason since, even with a cutting-edge telescope, humans will be unable to touch the stars in heaven and fully understand the supreme forces creating their movement. Similarly, even with state-of-the-art tools, the human gaze cannot expose the subtle forces at work within things because a remnant of invisibility will always endure, an unintelligible layer, a mysterious moment that will forever elude us.

The unknown – broad and narrow – infinite is somewhere there as a fixed but invisible vanishing point in the fluctuations of an exploring frustrated cognition. This uncertainty, however, can be approached as the necessary complement of another phenomenon that contradicts it – certainty – given that Pascal clearly knows that the infinite is present. He senses, with a certainty indemonstrable through arguments of reason, that the entities within the world are not the be-all-and-end-all, and that there is “something” beyond them. This knowledge is pre-reflective and pre-rational but can be addressed as a certainty, and only in its regard can a sense of uncertainty be sustained. In God’s words, as Pascal put it: “Console thyself, thou wouldst not

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seek Me, if thou hadst not found Me.” Knowledge of the unknown’s very existence on the horizon is certain, and it attracts us and seduces us, inviting us to follow it. In this fusion with the object of desire, life itself is realized, not (only) in the realization of the modern desire to secure the certainty of the intellect through reality’s deconstruction into elements and meticulous calculation of its components, but by attention to the inner sentiment intimating the existence of extra-rational spaces. It is from them that the original light of certainty shines.

The specific content of certainty and uncertainty can change with the Zeitgeist and with the internal inclinations and external life circumstances of each individual. The same is true of the grappling with the sense of detachment and insecurity that accompanies the variations of uncertainty. What provided a sense of metaphysical meaning for Pascal – belief in God – can thus be irrelevant for many of us. What has remained pertinent for a person living today, however, even one to whom Pascal’s concrete solution does not speak, is the non-banal and non-binary quality of the relationship pulsing between certainty and its absence and the complexity of the (un)certainty moment flowing from it, which Pascal pointed out. What we perceive as certain, proven, and established, loses its stable foundations, and becomes uncertain as soon as its metaphysical source of sustenance is no longer available. Modern science aspires to cover all the realms of our existence out of obvious concern for the continuity of life, structuring them through limitations and guidelines as clearly detailed as possible to create the best sense of orientation and safety. Ultimately, however, this attempt leads to violent alienation from the source of life itself, disrupting our original sense of connection to the life-world.

These relationships are discussed, among others, by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is at the center of the next section.

5 Ibid., par. 553, p. 181.
6 This primacy of intuition resonates in other twentieth-century philosophical writings such as, for example, those of Henri Bergson, who ranks the élan vital above scientific certainty and emphasizes its priority, independence, and freedom (see Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1944)). Gabriel Marcel also opposed the need of modern science to proclaim itself as the last and most certain word on life through its attitude toward reality as a reservoir of problems and functions, which he viewed as a “violent act that maims the deep roots of spiritual life.” Only the attachment to ontological-metaphysical passion can heal the human existential wound (see Gabriel Marcel, Position et Approches Concrètes du Mystère Ontologique (Paris: Vrin, 1967)).
2  A Passenger Train

I want to enclose all your silences
inside the body,
like the scroll we roll up inside the mezuzah,
and place them at all the entries and exits of my life.

ASHER ZENO

About three hundred years after Pascal, a philosopher who was also a mathematician, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), wrote On Certainty. Like Pascal’s Thoughts, this book too was published posthumously and comprises numbered items. Do the fragmentation and the essay-like character possibly reflect the nature of the pursuit of certainty, be it metaphysical certainty or fundamentally epistemic-logical certainty?

Wittgenstein’s life was also marked by fluctuations between opposites: between opulence and almost ascetic life conditions; between high hopes of becoming “a star in the sky” that were accompanied by extreme perfectionism, and a sense of remaining “stuck on earth”; between a prolonged suspension in the shadow of death (three of his four siblings committed suicide and he was actively involved in both world wars) and a powerful yearning for light and for the meaning of life. The greatest tension is that, together with these strong metaphysical-mystical strivings, Wittgenstein’s philosophizing seeks to restrict itself largely to the logical-analytical realm. Whenever it draws close to the riddle of existence, it marks its borders and asks to be silent whereof one cannot speak.

In On Certainty, Wittgenstein makes certainty a necessary fundamental layer underlying what we understand as change or uncertainty. Human conceptions and interpretations must, in his view, rely on some stable permanent

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7 From Asher Zeno, Ha-fragmentim shel Haim ve-Haya [The Fragments of Hayim and Haya], in personal correspondence (24/9/2014). Asher Zeno is an Israeli poet born in 1977, who lives between Strasbourg and Vienna. His poems have appeared in Alpayim, Helicon, and Ktovet.

8 Wittgenstein wrote about this gap to his good friend Paul Engelmann, a Viennese architect who was born in the Czech Republic and in 1934 emigrated to Israel. This quote is cited in Brian McGuinness, Wittgenstein, a Life: Young Ludwig, 1889–1921 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 157.

9 From Wittgenstein’s diary (15.9.1914): “Now I might have an opportunity to be a decent human being, because I am face to face with death. May the spirit enlighten me.” Cited in McGuinness, 221.

basis, precisely as a door can only turn if attached to a fixed hinge.\textsuperscript{11} The fixed layer of certainty is accepted as stable even when it lacks any rational justification or, in Pascal's terms, when it is based on feelings rather than on principles.\textsuperscript{12} We believe in it absolutely so that, subjectively, even a mistake in this realm of certainty is not a relevant possibility. Children too can only cast doubt out of faith in the words of their parents and teachers\textsuperscript{13} and, without this stable foundation, it is impossible to be critical or create something new.

Wittgenstein compares this certainty to a kind of “mythology,”\textsuperscript{14} which can be viewed as a narrative framework that is the basis for our life stories. What is interesting is that the relationship between certainty and uncertainty in a person's world picture is reciprocal and open:

> The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.\textsuperscript{15}

The border between what is perceived as certain and fixed as opposed to what we think of as changing and uncertain is not a given but is itself dynamic. What we had thought of as certain in our childhood may turn out to be a deception while knowledge that, as adults, we believed to be undeniable might emerge as erroneous or simply irrelevant even in the game of our lifetime. And vice-versa, what was perceived as a possibility, a hypothesis, or a vague horizon, might in time turn into solid unshakable ground, the hinge that our lives turn on. In both cases, however, the certainty never disappears entirely, and a sufficiently stable basis invariably remains into which to channel our feelings, perceptions, and attitudes.

Thus, for Pascal, the split between the certain and the uncertain had been static, just as someone contemplating the sky at his observatory should preferably not move in order to see clearly and meet the challenge of identifying astronomical configurations. In Wittgenstein's scheme, we abandon the static position. I allow myself to imagine this approach as a train ride: one can sit or move within the train, but whatever is in it will appear fixed whereas what can be seen outside the windows constantly changes, appearing uncertain and

\textsuperscript{12} Pascal, 1910, par. 3, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{13} Wittgenstein 1972, section 160.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., section 97.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
unstable. The train metaphor seems to be analogous to that of the door hinge. It does include within it, however, the person observing the surrounding reality, the intersubjective partnership in the language games, and the dynamic character of the certainty itself or, more precisely, its dual character, which enfolds the sense of inner permanence as well as the option of change.\textsuperscript{16}

What the train metaphor fails to reflect is the dynamism of the mutual relations between certainty and uncertainty and the way that each of them might percolate into the other. By contrast, the metaphor of water flowing over a rock on the riverbank is highly precise:

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.\textsuperscript{17}

The certainty element, therefore, which is perceived as stable, does in fact ceaselessly change, and sand from the rock released by the gushing current streams into the flow of the river. The walls of stability might come loose and become unstable, changing, uncertain, and similarly, the sand could set and join the solid basis. Wittgenstein changes perspectives here, climbs on intra-world ladders and comes down from them, jumps like a squirrel from branch to branch to articulate the elusive nature of certainty and to expose, between the lines, the primary uncertainty that underlies every certainty. The uncertainty that precedes every mythology is the absolute dimension of life, the extra-worldly realm that Wittgenstein hardly spoke of despite, or perhaps because of, his high respect for it.

In mid-life, people sometimes change trains, be it gradually or suddenly. Such a change is invariably tied to a strong turmoil. A change of trains – meaning the transformation of our life mythology – that occurs by choice differs from one forced from the outside. The COVID crisis, when many of us found that our train had turned into a lame horse-drawn carriage with very small windows to the landscape, led to a harsh sense of erosion, uncertainty,

\textsuperscript{16} As to who drives the train, this is a separate question with many possible answers. We seem to be in a transition – from a passenger train driven by flesh and blood individuals to a means of transport whose destination will be decided by artificial intelligence. Currently, people are increasingly endorsing the view that artificial intelligence flows in a far more stable channel than our personal one and, therefore, its decisions are far more “certain” and stable than our own. See, for example, Yuval Noah Harari, “The Information Revolution,” in \textit{Revolutions: The Turning Points that Shaped Our World}, ed. Yuval Gilead (Ben Shemen: Modan, 2017) [Heb].

\textsuperscript{17} Wittgenstein 1972, section 99.
and even collapse of the world picture we had been used to. Wittgenstein, however, shows that we can transform the floodwater, which brings with it fresh materials, into stable, solid ground.

The advantage of Wittgenstein’s certainty and uncertainty conception lies in the creation of a dynamic mutual relationship between the two. Instead of relating to each of them as a given, finite thing, Wittgenstein suggests that their connection is dialogical: the fixed is necessary for us to move within our lives because it substantiates and enriches what changes, but the changing enriches the fixed and essential and can affect it and even create it.

People require a balanced learning of certainty and uncertainty in their lives. Too much certainty and safety prevent movement and flexibility because excessive fixation chokes and dries up the source of life. But too much uncertainty cuts away the ground from under us, deprives us of a basic sense of security, limits our ability to feel faith and hope, and may even take us too far or, to remain with the train metaphor, “derail” us.

Wittgenstein’s conception of the certainty underlying the creative flow of life is an immanent approach seeking to remain within the borders of language and its games, within the cage18 of logic that Wittgenstein assumed in his philosophical works. Yet, as someone who has so insistently been knocking on the borders and bars of the cage, he understands – somewhere beyond is an entire realm deserving honor and respect. Indeed, all the texts that were and will ever be written within the borders of language negotiate with it. Declared silence about this realm does not imply its cancellation but its most powerful presence. Wittgenstein is thus revealed as a metaphysical thinker, no less so than, for example, Pascal.19 What is not said is there and, at times, shows itself20 in its silence even more than in what we do say every day, just as one who is dead

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19 See, for example, an undated letter that Wittgenstein sends to his editor Ludwig von Ficker, where he clarifies that what is important in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophus is in fact outside it: “I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I’ll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I’m convinced that, strictly speaking, it can only be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which many are babbling today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.” See Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Letters to Ludwig von Ficker,” trans. Bruce Gillette, ed. Allan Janik, in Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives, ed. C. G. Luckhardt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 94.
20 In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophus, Wittgenstein writes that “the world as a whole” exists, just as eternity, infinity, and being reveal themselves to us. See Wittgenstein, 1972, section 6.43.
is at times more powerfully present in our heart than when sitting in the next room. Wittgenstein is like a haiku poet – collects lists and tiny bits of concrete reality to actualize through them the most sublime riddle of existence.

One who resolutely sought to give utterance to what cannot be spoken was the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. The third part of the article will consider his (un)certainty approach – not to determine who in this philosophical threesome was right or wrong or who was by chance closer to my worldview. Rather, my wish is to enable the shared life-world to speak in a plurality of voices through the thoughts of the three and to share the wonder at the way each one adds a specific nuance to the beauty of the total meaning disclosed through them.

3 A Raft on the Sea

The last leaf trembles on the sycamore tree because it knows that, what does not tremble, is not strong.

VLADIMÍR HOLAN21

Jan Patočka (1907–1977) lived in an era when phenomenology’s original passion for truth about the essence of “the things themselves” crossed paths with the abysmal experience of the absurd in the existentialist movement that followed the Second World War. He was a philosopher who, in his youth, had experienced the openness of Czechoslovakia’s multicultural society between the two world wars.22 He also grappled personally with the shutting of the main creative channels in the public realm during the totalitarian regime that took over after 1948. For Patočka, then, making certainty and its absence a key topic of his philosophical strivings was not a random event. The recurring motif throughout Patočka’s writings is whether any kind of unity can be found behind the frenzied multiplicity of phenomena – is the changing of all that exists supported and constituted by a stability that we can rely upon?23

22 Under the leadership of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who was himself a philosopher. Karl Popper viewed the Czechoslovakia of the time as the closest representation of what he called an “open society.” See Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).
The human condition, says Patočka, in a formula reminiscent of Pascal’s starting point, is a state of permanent uncertainty. Our lives are essentially problematic and conflictual, comparable to a Heraclitan polemos – a ceaseless struggle between contradictory forces. The insight of a reflective-critical person who chooses to live a life of truth rather than one of fake safety and a naive delusion of stability is that holding on to any real certainty, fixed and stable, is impossible, either in the physical world or in the world of metaphysical solutions. Humans, then, must learn to bear vagueness and existential insecurity in all realms of life.

The unpleasantness in the experience of uncertainty is a kind of crossroads offering two entirely different possibilities. One is to bear the uncertainty and let it be our constant companion in all paths of life. The other is to channel the physically embodied consciousness far away from the uncomfortable sense of lacking an anchor, be it through a ceaseless distraction that will silence the deep fear of the unknown or through attachment to some metaphysical principle that will provide a false sense of certainty. At the material level, one such anchor could be, for example, commitment to some ideology that offers a key to the interpretation of the surrounding reality, or the pursuit of wealth or achievements that grant pleasure and a sense of security, however temporal. At the metaphysical level, institutionalized faith in a concrete God, or adopting a worldview postulating no unifying sense behind all the temporal, partial, and constantly changing meanings could be a shelter from burdensome uncertainty. This nihilistic worldview denies the very reality of a unifying idea and views it as an abstraction. It thereby denies the possibility of “something” that sets a direction to our way here, a primary principle, a supra- or super-worldly power, or some sublime destination that we should contemplate. It is a faith seeking to set existential uncertainty on stable ground.

A new sense of certainty regarding the lack of any overall meaning is, according to Patočka, the source of a form of relativism associated with a dreary way of life, where everything appears to be of equal value. In this fashion, people grapple with “a shallow and indifferent tolerance, resting on a general possibility and on revulsion,”\(^\text{24}\) that is, with the leveling of everything, which occurs when everything seems possible, knowable, and achievable. Life, therefore, seems to lack an “aura,” in Walter Benjamin’s sense\(^\text{25}\) – no


mysterious horizon or depth of possibility. According to Patočka, human access to the certainty of a pre-knowledge that “every individual meaning refers to a global meaning, every relative meaning to an absolute meaning” was thereby barred. With such a bar comes relief because pre-knowledge might be experienced as “darkness, at times one that is unutterable, almost hollow.” But the price is too high – the loss of humanity, the barring of the power of life from life.

Patočka held that humans cannot live for long without a connection to some overall absolute meaning. In other words, they cannot live meaningful lives within the certitude of meaninglessness. At some stage, the human obligation is to become aware of the basic datum that “the incredible simply is.” Even if this datum, in its transparent simplicity, is unacceptable, humans must devote their life to the search for its meaning.

Patočka draws a comparison between embarking on this search and sailing on a raft at sea. When we acknowledge the essential uncertainty of our existence and divert our gaze from the fictitious stability of our routine lives to the vague horizon,

all the carefully preserved constructions – the political ones but also the moral and human ones, and even the sureness of family relations attentively disguised over time – everything fell apart. The old proud ship sank and only a small raft was left.

A flimsy raft in mid-ocean symbolizes a pure experience of uncertainty. The open sea extending all around that can flood and sink us at any moment concretizes the essential uncertainty, the lack of an anchor, whose deep source is in the finitude of our existence and in our dread of death. But the surface of the raft as a remnant of the ground below our feet signals a naïve or critically acquired confidence in the very existence, somewhere beyond the horizon, of life’s absolute meaning. The horizon joins earth and sky and guides our movement in the world. In that sense, it is the fixed and certain frame of all that

28 Patočka, 1996, 75.
is uncertain in our lives. Even in circumstances so fragile, and precisely then, when humans nakedly confront the vast forces of the world as faltering rickety wanderers, the world speaks to us and we can choose to open our hearts and listen.\textsuperscript{31} A very clear voice will perhaps be heard then, a voice evoking a deep experience of serenity and stability despite the patently uncertain and unstable external conditions. The possibility will then emerge that the infinity of the world envisaged on the horizon will perhaps be revealed within the individual’s soul. In Patočka’s words, the reason is that “this raft is love – love of truth and within truth,” and it also bears hope and unswerving faith in the possibility of finding a new, true certainty, a certainty that we will be able to rely upon and thus reach solid ground.\textsuperscript{32} At such moments of creating a connection and a dialogue with “the Idea,”\textsuperscript{33} with life in its entirety, we cease to live “for and from isolated enticements because [now] everything enlists in one sole concern that asks for unconditional devotion and promises to serve as life’s absolute support.”\textsuperscript{34} The keyword here is connection: we may not touch the horizon of universal truth, see the “full picture,” or understand the total meaning through the terms of a conceptualizing consciousness. And yet, we must still engage in an ongoing dialogue with the object of our pre-knowledge. People may experience uncertainty and essential precariousness in their lives and still be sure that they must sustain a reciprocal relationship with the mysterious, deep, and sublime moment of our life-world and, in the connection with it, intuitively experience a sense of fullness, direction, and realization. Within this reciprocity, the sense of discontent and even suffering accompanying uncertainty could turn into an auspicious burden. If we can stay within the uncertainty, look at it directly and experience it in our bones, it could help us to open up to the world and to ourselves, becoming sensitive to the subtle voices whispering both outside and inside. Pre-knowledge of eternity and infinity as essential features of our lives could then kindle a new and intensive experience of certainty, the certainty of a soul that draws its completeness and its clarity from

\textsuperscript{31} Patočka, 1996, 58–59.
\textsuperscript{32} Patočka, 1998: 297.
\textsuperscript{34} Jan Patočka, “Duch a dvě základní vrstvy intencionality [The Mind and Two Layers of Intentionality],” in \textit{Fenomenologické spisy 1}, ed. Ivan Chvatík and Jan Frei (Praha: Oikoymenh, 2008), 297.
its own movement and does not require further support from empirical proofs or external rational deductions.\textsuperscript{35}

For Patočka, every creation or discovery flows from an uncertain spring of certainty, from a nebulous sureness that at times resembles more closely the blurred realms of dream:

Pre-knowledge ... means that, even before disclosure, we have some knowledge about the direction the spirit will turn to, that the spirit knows about stable ground even before it can seize it. The basis of the disclosure [or the invention] is a vast and inarticulable certainty.\textsuperscript{36}

At such moments, the lived body and its embodied consciousness experiences certainty regarding what has not yet been disclosed:

The entire world drains into one point from which certainty bursts out. Rather than creating it, one follows in its wake and allows the idea to be created inside one. There, within the certainty of a pre-knowledge that transcends any possible utterance, lies the shared meaning of all the guidelines of science [and of human creativity as a whole – H. N.]. That is, knowledge of the connection to reality and its gradual penetration, knowledge that this reality precedes the movement of our consciousness and that, in principle, we can come close to it.\textsuperscript{37}

The whole of human activity, then, is meant to be an expression of this mutual connection between humans and the life world. A true creation, be it scientific, philosophical, or artistic, is not meant to focus on the addition of interesting and original details to whatever exists and on the self-realization of its genius author. Rather, it is meant to serve a mysterious metaphysical certainty that is expressed as knowledge of the heart and is nowhere to be found in any concrete place in its original shape. Hence, the creator or the inventor are merely tools or channels for this certainty to be realized in the visible world.

What can we learn from Patočka’s words, which were cited here in intimate proximity to those of Pascal and Wittgenstein? The direction that Patočka suggests for contending with existential uncertainty as the human condition in the world is a dialectical fusion of the two other approaches. On the one hand, Patočka shares the yearning for metaphysical certainty as it appears in

\textsuperscript{35} Patočka, 2008a, 20, 22.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 23.
Pascal but, from twentieth-century domains, he is unsuccessful as well as uninterested in tying it to any concrete transcendent object or principle. Pascal’s faith in the very existence of the divine dimension in our lives is also present in Patočka then, but only as a direction or an intention, as a religious (but non-institutionalized) inclination, as a horizon to focus one’s gaze on without ever conquering it. The very search for absolute meaning, even when its form is blurred and its content necessarily enigmatic, is for Patočka the meaning of the act of transcendence – the going beyond what is. The journey, in this case, is the goal.

On the other hand, Patočka was familiar with the approach formulated by Wittgenstein who, in his philosophical writings, delimited the borders of certainty to the immanent dimension of our life-world and, therefore, characterized it as relative, context-bound, a result of life practices and social conventions. Patočka did not accept this limitation, but its spirit resonates in his approach in the following way: both the universal essences of things (meaning their certainty dimension) and the unifying metaphysical principle of the appearance of things (meaning the total meaning of what is) are always context-bound and, therefore, dynamic. Not only does the sublime dimension of the total meaning constitute all the partial meanings but it is also dependent on them and they, in turn, affect it and the mode of its appearance to humans.

Within the laws of logic, this synthesis of two contradictory directions of thought appears entirely unacceptable. And yet, Patočka shed light on this “impossible possibility” in a series of writings where he dealt with the unifying certainty behind the multiplicity of human manifestations, of the world, and of the relationships between them. Thus, he spoke of the human “dynamic essence,” of the historical nature of the existence principle, and of absolute morality as invariably context-bound.

Patočka shows that the certainty underlying all our knowledge – all the concrete manifestations as well as the logic itself – eludes our ability to gain full knowledge of it. Nevertheless, transcending beyond the borders of language and thought is the essence of humanity and we must never give it up. If we give up the search, the world and what is in it become lacking, the vitality of existence withers, and we collapse into a void. To translate this into the terms of certainty and uncertainty, we must not repress the power of the uncertainty dimension and deny its presence because, ultimately, this dimension serves as

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38 Reference to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophus* can be found, for example, in Patočka’s “The Concept of Certainty,” where he dealt with the certainty underlying every human pursuit about thirty years before Wittgenstein wrote *On Certainty*. Patočka related to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as an ontological theory of logic.
the certain platform for phenomena and events in our lives. In Patočka's formulation, "All the spin and the clutter of the world's movement ... powers that are not enormous grow from infinite silence and tenderness, from the velvet of the heart."39

The phenomenon of uncertainty was discussed from the perspective of three different philosophers and enfolded a discourse on the concept of certainty. The reason is not only that these concepts are mutually complementary, like two sides of a coin, but that the measure of uncertainty in the very use of these concepts can hardly be ignored. We would have expected the one to define the borders of the other in a clear division of roles between them, but that is not the case. Instead, we found that these two phenomena, rather than mutually connected by subtle threads, are woven together with such thick ropes that they are occasionally ripped off from their place and occasionally swap the time and place of their appearance.

The meanings of certainty and uncertainty as well as the borders between them are perceived differently by each of these thinkers. Even within their conceptions, not only are the meanings and borders not fixed but the concepts themselves are at times used alternately.

For Pascal, rational-scientific certainty is merely a deception and any attempt to exploit it fully will expose the uncertainty that embraces it like a remote firmament full of stars embraces the earth. But this uncertainty is a window to another certainty, the certainty of the heart, which illustrates that the nebulous frame is ultimately the sole moment of certainty that can console us in our world. All that is left is to remember what we had managed to forge.

For Wittgenstein, certainty is so closely interwoven with its absence that, at times, they are indistinguishable, just as the train we are sitting in appears to be moving to our destination though it is standing because what is moving outside the carriage created an illusion of movement. Moreover, what was foremost for Wittgenstein – as he admitted – was the pre-certain dimension, which precedes every split into certainty and its opposite. The fluidity of the two concepts hints at the existence of this dimension, which serves as the source of all that flows within it.

Finally, Patočka fostered a conception of certainty that ties the "female" stance of Pascal and the (at least ostensibly) “male” stance of Wittgenstein. Patočka exposes to us the Titanic made up of fake, temporal, and arbitrary

certainties that, after sinking, was replaced by a small and flimsy raft. Its shaky movement tells the story of the horizon of our possibilities. True, they are forever unattainable but we can always try to draw closer to them and live in their light. Its blurriness notwithstanding, this horizon is ultimately the anchor of our lives, the hinge of our life-world.

In sum: life without a metaphysical connection to what is beyond it lacks value. That is what Pascal preached, what Wittgenstein kept silent about, and what Patočka exposed. From these three thinkers and their biographies, we learn that the search for the certainty dimension in human existence bears meaning only if pursued with one’s whole body and soul, only when one is touched, and even wounded, by the uncertainty of life. Only the removal of the sharp border that separates us from the world and what is in it can bring down the towers of delusions and false speculations and build, out of the ruins, a new experience of certainty rooted in the primal cooperation and harmony that prevail in our life world. The connection of artists to this harmony is what Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke of: “his [the artist’s] sense of stable harmony never deserts him … Like that little looking-glass from the fairy-tales: look into it and you will see – not yourself – but for one second, the Inaccessible, whither no man can ride, no man fly. And only the soul gives a groan …”40

I hope that the “problem” of (un)certainty was not solved here because that was not what I confronted at the start. I addressed the two concepts, not as objects of the rational consciousness that knows them but mainly as expressions of the mystery of existence, which emerges and eludes us. The thoughts, the metaphors, and the feelings laid out here were not meant to lead to clear and certain answers of any kind but to open opportunities for wonder and for continuing a search that will only end on the horizon of infinity.

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