

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief is quite radical: 'If Christianity is the truth, then all the philosophy written about it is false' (*Culture and Value* (CV) 89/83<sup>1</sup>). This is not a pronouncement that has served to endear Wittgenstein to many philosophers of religion or militant atheists seeking to debunk religious belief. For the former think that Wittgenstein has eviscerated religious belief of serious content, while the latter believe that what Wittgenstein is offering is a *recherché* form of apologetics. I doubt that anything I say in this Element will change this. Nonetheless, I will try to show that both characterizations are wide of the mark – Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief, just as his writing more generally, intends to challenge the often philosophically complacent assumptions that drive these verdicts.<sup>2</sup>

A work of this length inevitably has to be highly selective and concentrate on what the author takes to be the most important aspects of the overall narrative. Consequently, the debate sometimes takes place with a small group of suspects (a wider overview of the literature is provided in the footnotes). But the respective interlocutors have been chosen because they are representatives of major lines of argument that continue to dominate contemporary discussion.

I also make no apology for concentrating primarily on Christian religious belief. This is the religion that Wittgenstein was brought up in and that he grappled with during his entire life. Moreover, many of Wittgenstein's insights generalize and can fruitfully be applied to Islam and Judaism, just as much as to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

This Element is composed of six sections, each with their own subsections. It presupposes no prior knowledge of Wittgenstein's work and aims to be accessible. Its desire is solely for an open-minded reader, who, 'in the darkness of this time',<sup>4</sup> seeks a new way of making sense of religious belief.

### 1.2 Wittgenstein's Philosophical Method

In order to understand Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief, we must first understand Wittgenstein's philosophical method. For there is an intimate

<sup>1</sup> The first page reference is to the newer edition of *Culture and Value*, the second one to the older version.

<sup>2</sup> For my own first attempt in this direction, see Schönbaumsfeld (2007).

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, see Sievers and Suleiman (in press). Also see Gorazd Andrejic and Daniel Weiss (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*.

connection between central themes in Wittgenstein's later work, *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), and Wittgenstein's thoughts on religious belief that appear in various different posthumously published collections, not all of which were directly penned by Wittgenstein himself (such as, for example, the *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief* and Wittgenstein's *Cambridge Lectures* (CL) (1930–3)). Since PI was always intended by Wittgenstein for publication and this work constitutes Wittgenstein's most considered views, I adopt the exegetical principle that PI be given priority when it comes to ascertaining what implications Wittgenstein's oeuvre has for a conception of religion.<sup>5</sup> Once these pieces of the puzzle are in place, it will be much easier to make sense of all the other available material that concerns religious matters more directly. This way of proceeding also has the advantage that remarks that are derived from lecture notes (such as the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (LC) and CL 1930–3) can be assessed against Wittgenstein's overall philosophical concerns.

Wittgenstein not only invented a new philosophical method – which he once described as similar to the shift from alchemy to chemistry<sup>6</sup> – he also used it in an iconoclastic manner, in order to *dissolve*, rather than solve, the great philosophical problems of the past. Philosophy is, therefore, not a body of knowledge for Wittgenstein, but an *activity* of grammatical (conceptual) clarification or elucidation<sup>7</sup>: 'Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language' [*die Mittel unserer Sprache*] (PI §109). Wittgenstein's method is devised to liberate us from the spell that language casts by freeing us from the conceptual confusions and illusions that hold us in thrall and which we take for genuine problems requiring a theoretical solution. But if Wittgenstein is right that philosophical problems turn out to be illusory pseudo-problems that only appear to make sense for as long as one remains within their grip, then these cannot be addressed in a standard theoretical manner. For this presupposes that we are confronted by a genuine claim that one might refute, rather than by a confusion that can only be undermined or dissolved.

<sup>5</sup> Religious reflections also play an important part in Wittgenstein's early writings, such as the *Notebooks* (1984) and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), but these works are hamstrung by Wittgenstein's early conception of language, which ultimately confined religious questions to the realm of the ineffable. For this reason, my main focus will be the later work, as its implications for a conception of religious belief are much more profound. I will, however, be making reference to the early work where pertinent and appropriate. For more in-depth discussion of early Wittgenstein's significance for religion, see Schönbaumsfeld (2007, 2013, 2018a).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Monk (1991: 298).

<sup>7</sup> This was a view that Wittgenstein already held in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) and that he never changed his mind on, despite his later conception of philosophy being in many respects very different from his earlier one.

*Wittgenstein on Religious Belief*

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That such a conception of philosophy could be perceived as destructive – both in Wittgenstein’s time as well as in our own – Wittgenstein himself seems well aware:

Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only houses of cards [*Luftgebäude*], and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood. (PI §118)

But to get someone to see that it is only *Luftgebäude* (‘castles in the air’ would be a closer rendition of the notion than ‘houses of cards’) that are being destroyed – not something genuinely great and important – is extraordinarily difficult. For *Luftgebäude* look, when viewed from a certain perspective, very much like imposing buildings. Consequently, it is easy to become attached to these appearances and to be resistant to anyone wishing to expose them for what they are: bits of stone and rubble that a grammatical conjuring trick (PI §308) has turned into an estate of palatial proportions.

In order to achieve clarity in philosophy, it is consequently imperative that one learn to resist the lure of what one wants to see, in favour of giving the facts – the way things actually are – their due. This means not allowing oneself to be taken in by the ‘surface grammar’ of our words (how they appear to function linguistically in a sentence):

In the use of words, one might distinguish ‘surface grammar’ from ‘depth grammar’. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the sentence structure, the part of its use – one might say – that can be taken in by the ear. – And now compare the depth grammar, say of the verb ‘to mean’, with what its surface grammar would lead us to presume. No wonder one finds it difficult to know one’s way about. (PI §664)

The surface grammar of the verb ‘to mean’, its similarity to ‘action’ verbs like ‘to wash’ or ‘to write’, suggests that it is the name of a mental, as opposed to a physical, process going on in the hidden medium of ‘the mind’, whereas Wittgenstein’s conceptual investigation shows that its depth grammar (how the word really functions) is actually quite different. Rather than referring to a hidden process, ‘to mean’ is much more similar to the concept of having an ability: a competent language-user can mean ‘X’ rather than ‘Y’, not because something special goes on in their mind (or brain), but because they are generally able to apply the words ‘X’ and ‘Y’ with facility. Whether a speaker meant ‘X’ or ‘Y’ can, therefore, be determined, not by looking into the speaker’s mind, but by ascertaining whether the speaker has mastered a particular technique, what the speaker goes on to say and do, what consequences the speaker would be prepared (or not prepared) to draw, etc.

So, when Wittgenstein says, at PI §122, that our grammar is deficient in surveyability, what he means is that the ‘depth grammar’ is still unclear to us. All we see is the surface grammar, the mere syntactical structure of the word or sentence – ‘the use that can be taken in by the ear’ – not the actual use, what early Wittgenstein would have called the ‘logical syntax’ of the sign: the rules for the correct use of the word, which can be hidden underneath the word’s apparent use (the ‘surface grammar’) in the way that the real form of a body may be obscured by a person’s clothes (TLP 4.002).

Attending to the ‘depth grammar’, however, requires a willingness to look beyond the surface; to refuse to be taken in by superficial linguistic appearances that may lead one astray. This is difficult, as the surface appearance may be attractive and tempt us to want to continue to view the problem in the accustomed manner. For this reason, Wittgenstein thinks that the struggle for clarity requires both an intellectual effort and an engagement of the will. We need the intellectual acumen to see through the deceptive appearances, but also require the willpower to resist bewitchment by grammar: ‘A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language only seemed to repeat it to us inexorably’ (PI §115).

Because our language is full of substantives, for example, and we naively assume that the meaning of a word is the object it refers to – Wittgenstein calls this Augustine’s picture of language – if we are unable actually to find such an object in the world, we take it that there must be a ‘supernatural’ object or spirit that the word can refer to instead: ‘Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit* [*Geist*]’ (PI §36). Arguably, this temptation motivated Plato’s theory of the Forms – the ‘Form of the Good’ or of ‘Beauty’ can never be found in the myriad different objects we actually apply the words ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’ to, but only in a metaphysical realm of ‘Forms’ populated by the abstract objects that are the alleged referents of these unadulterated essences. As Wittgenstein says in the *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* (RFGB) §25: ‘Here the image used in thinking of reality is that beauty, death, etcetera are the pure (concentrated) substances, and that they are present in a beautiful object as an admixture.’ Similarly, many mathematicians (including philosophers of mathematics) think that since number words cannot refer to empirical objects in the world, they must refer instead to abstract objects. Relatedly, philosophers of religion, theologians and ordinary religious people often believe that the word ‘God’ is the name of a supernatural object or entity.

What we are primarily taken in by, in such cases, is the fact that words like ‘beauty’, ‘one’ and ‘God’, appear to operate in exactly the same way as more ordinary words whose referents we can straightforwardly point to, such as ‘cat’,

‘table’ and ‘chair’. From this we draw the conclusion that in the former case, too, there must be objects these words stand for, it’s just that they happen not to be empirically locatable.

Augustine’s picture of language, in other words, seems natural and intuitive, as it reduces the diversity of the actual function of words to an easily graspable common denominator: ‘the words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names’ (PI §1). Wittgenstein himself was tempted by something like such a view in his early work, the *Tractatus*. Later, however, Wittgenstein realizes that language is not as uniform as Augustine’s picture would have us believe. There are many different kinds of word and they do not all function as names: ‘Someone who describes the learning of language in this way [by ostensive definition] is, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like “table”, “chair”, “bread”, and of people’s names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself’ (PI §1). Naturally, the remaining kinds of word do *not* take care of themselves, which is why philosophers tend to invent abstract entities in order to explain how these words can function like names after all.

Rather than trying to press the diversity of the functions of words into a uniform mould that distorts them, Wittgenstein suggests that we would do better to abandon our preconceived idea that the essence of language consists in naming, for this would enable us to see that the role that a word plays in language is complex and cannot be reduced to an attitude of ‘one size fits all’. ‘Think just of exclamations’, Wittgenstein says, ‘with their completely different functions. Water! Away! Ow! Help! Splendid!’<sup>8</sup> No! Are you still inclined to call these words “names of objects”?’ (PI §27).

Whether a word functions as the name of an object – and Wittgenstein does not deny that some words are names<sup>9</sup> – is not something that can be settled independently of attending to the context in which the word is used. It is the overall role the word plays in the language-game or linguistic practice that tells us what kind of word it is and what it does. This is why Wittgenstein says: ‘For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (PI §43). Just as the significance of the different chess pieces can be explained by describing the moves these pieces can make in the game of chess, so the significance of a word can be explained by looking at how the word is employed in a particular language-game. This is not to advance a new theory

<sup>8</sup> In PI these words occur as separate paragraphs. For ease of reading, I have removed these spaces.

<sup>9</sup> Neither does he deny that (some) words refer to objects. What he does deny is that the meaning is something independent of the word that can be reified (either an empirical or an abstract object).

of meaning – hence the warning that Wittgenstein’s suggestion is not meant to apply across the board – but to provide us with the tools to free ourselves from enslavement to the Augustinian picture that made us believe that there is only one way for language to operate.

### 1.3 Theology and Grammar

Although religious questions were of the first importance to Wittgenstein – something testified to by his various conversations with friends,<sup>10</sup> his lectures<sup>11</sup> as well as his own reflections scattered throughout, for example, the early *Notebooks*, and, in particular, the volume that has come to be known as *Culture and Value* – in PI itself, there is only one direct allusion to a religious theme:

*Essence* is expressed in grammar (PI §371).

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)  
 (PI §373)

Wittgenstein believes that one of the main confusions that arise in philosophy (and elsewhere) is to mistake a grammatical (logical) feature of a concept for an empirical description and to end up predicating of the thing what lies in the mode of representation (PI §104). The comparison with theology and the concept of ‘God’ serves to make this perspicuous (which is perhaps why theology is the first thing that occurs to Wittgenstein in this regard). A passage from the recently published lectures from the early 1930s throws more light on what Wittgenstein might have in mind here:

Now (a) suppose ‘god’ means something like a human being; then ‘he has 2 arms’ & ‘he has 4 arms’ are not grammatical propositions but (b) suppose someone says: You can’t talk of god having arms, this is grammatical.  
 (CL 321)

If we think the word ‘God’ is the name of something very akin to a human being, then saying that this god has two or four arms would not be different from offering a straightforward empirical description of something, for example, ‘this animal has two legs’ or ‘this animal has four legs’. Here we are describing something contingent that could be otherwise, had the world been different in some way. But if we say something like ‘It makes no sense to speak of God having arms’, then we are making a grammatical remark that shows that it is part

<sup>10</sup> See Wittgenstein’s conversations with Maurice Drury (in Rhees (1984)), Norman Malcolm (1993, 2001) and Rush Rhees (2001), for instance.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the aforementioned CL, LC and RFGB.

of the concept of God that we can't attribute certain physical features to him – it's not that God is an entity who just happens not to have these characteristics.

The essential features of our concepts are specified by the grammar of the concept. To give a non-theological example, to say that 'one is a number' is not to attribute some predicate (that of numberhood) to an abstract object, but to tell us how the word 'one' functions in our language – namely, as a number-word. To say that 'red is a colour' is similarly to say something about the grammar of 'red', not to give a description of an esoteric object. To think otherwise is precisely to predicate of the thing what lies in the mode of representation: to believe one is tracing the thing's nature when in fact you are giving a rule for the correct use of a word (i.e. something grammatical).

Many philosophical and theological problems arise if one doesn't heed this distinction. If, for instance, one believes that the word 'God' functions like the name of a 'gaseous vertebrate',<sup>12</sup> then it would make sense to ask where such an entity could be found, whether it had certain (invisible) physical features, if it ever got bored, etc. Wittgenstein thinks that such questions are nonsensical. As he says in a late conversation with Rhees: 'Our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings. And if you try to talk about God as you would talk about a human being, you are likely to come to talk nonsense, to ask nonsensical questions and so on' (Rhees, 2001: 413).

Why does Wittgenstein think that one would come to speak nonsense if one tried to talk about God as one would about a human being? Primarily, because this betrays a category mistake: God is not a 'gaseous vertebrate' with invisible stomach and toenails. To think otherwise is to turn the concept of God into that of an idol (into an in principle perceivable entity, such as a Golden Calf, for example, or a god who lives on Mount Olympus), and this, in the Christian (and, perhaps, other monotheistic religious traditions), would also be blasphemous.

Now one might think that, apart from some militant atheists who believe that people engage in religious practices out of sheer stupidity – a notion that Wittgenstein particularly criticizes in the case of English anthropologist, Frazer, who interpreted the magical rituals of primitive tribes as forms of false science<sup>13</sup> – there are not many theologians or religious believers who would be happy to ascribe such a crude grammar to the word 'God'. But such an appearance would be deceptive, as quite often a 'gaseous vertebrate' conception of God (one that anthropomorphizes God and conceives of God as a kind of superhuman) comes dressed in metaphysical garb, which can make the

<sup>12</sup> The phrase is Ernst Häckel's and mentioned by Wittgenstein in CL 319.

<sup>13</sup> 'All that Frazer does is to make the practice plausible to those who think like him. It is very strange to present all these practices, in the end, so to speak, as foolishness. But it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity' (RFGB §1).

crudeness harder to spot. For example, the God of analytic theism is conceived as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good ‘person without a body’ – where a ‘person without a body’ is usually regarded in Cartesian manner as a purely ‘mental substance’.<sup>14</sup> Here, the idea is that human beings have both a mind and a body – where, if you are a Cartesian (or neo-Cartesian), these words refer to distinct substances (or entities). Hence, if God is like a person but lacks a body, he comes out, on this view, as being a super-powerful ‘mental substance’, something very like a ‘gaseous vertebrate’.

Such a ‘gaseous vertebrate’ conception seems clearly driven by Augustine’s picture of language discussed earlier: the meaning of a word is the object it stands for. ‘God’, being a proper name, that is, the name of a person – but obviously not of a physical one with tendons and toenails – must, therefore, be the name of a disembodied one: a purely ‘spiritual’ being. In other words, the ‘surface grammar’ of the word ‘God’ tempts us to think that ‘God’ names a human-like object, when, really, Wittgenstein believes, the ‘depth grammar’ is quite different.

But how do we work out what the depth grammar is? In the same way as we would with any other word – by attending to the difference its employment makes in lived praxis:

Really what I should like to say is that here too what is important is not the *words* you use or what you think while saying them, so much as the difference that they make at different points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? And just the same thing goes for the Trinity. Theology that insists on *certain* words & phrases & prohibits others, makes nothing clearer. (Karl Barth)

It gesticulates with words, as it were, because it wants to say something & does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense (CV 97e/85e).

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that it is not possible to find out what someone means – or, indeed, whether two people mean the same – merely by looking at the words these people use. For they can use the *same words* and yet mean something completely different. Augustine’s picture glosses over this important insight by insisting that all that matters to meaning is reference: as long as we have some idea of what the objects are that the words in question are supposed to refer to, we know what the words mean. But this, of course, is very simplistic. Not only is ‘reference’ itself a word in the language, which might not have a context-invariant use (i.e. ‘reference’ might mean slightly different things in different contexts), but knowing only that the word stands for some

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Swinburne (2001, 2016) as a case *instar omnium*.



object does not give you the rules for the correct use of the word. This is why Wittgenstein spends so much time talking about ostensive definition at the beginning of PI. An ostensive definition will only teach me the rules for the correct use of a word if the overall role of the word in the language is already clear (PI §30) – that is, if I already know what a name is, for instance, and how it functions: ‘When one shows someone the king in chess and says “This is the king”, one does not thereby explain to him the use of this piece – unless he already knows the rules of the game except for this last point: the shape of the king’ (PI §31).

Presumably, Wittgenstein is criticizing Barth (in the previous passage from CV) for merely insisting on a different form of words (Barth wanted to replace talk of a ‘three person’ God with the concept of God’s *Seinsweisen* (ways of being)<sup>15</sup>), instead of clarifying the actual *use* of the word ‘Trinity’. That is to say, Wittgenstein seems to think that banning one form of words, while allowing another, will not deepen one’s understanding of the relevant concept, unless the new form of words makes a significant difference to the religious practice itself.<sup>16</sup> If it makes no difference which form of words is used, then these words are idle wheels: ‘a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it is not part of the mechanism’ (PI §271).

#### 1.4 Reception and Strategy

Although Wittgenstein’s conception of religious belief has been enormously influential – both in philosophy as well as in theology<sup>17</sup> – it has also been subject to considerable distortion. In the contemporary literature, for example, Wittgenstein has variously been labelled a fideist (Nielsen, in Nielsen & Phillips, 2005), a non-cognitivist (Glock, 1995; Hyman, 2001) and a relativist of sorts (Kusch, 2011). What most of these views have in common is that they take for granted that the standard ‘cognitive’/ ‘non-cognitive’ dichotomy is the only game in town: religious beliefs are either to be construed as straightforwardly ‘factual’ beliefs, whose content can be expressed in ordinary propositions (cognitivism), or religious beliefs

<sup>15</sup> See Barth (2003: 355).

<sup>16</sup> For a more charitable interpretation of what Barth might have been up to, see Schönbaumsfeld (in press).

<sup>17</sup> D. Z. Phillips is probably the first and most prominent proponent of a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion (see, for example, Phillips, 2014 (first published 1965), 1988, 1993). Other major philosophical figures who have made good use of Wittgenstein’s ideas on religious belief include Cyril Barrett (1991), John Cottingham (2009), Cora Diamond (2005), Peter Winch (1987, 1995), Stephen Mulhall (2001) and Hilary Putnam (1992). Prominent theologians influenced by Wittgenstein include Fergus Kerr (1986), Paul Holmer (2012), Andrew Moore (2003) and Rowan Williams (2014). Philosophers and theologians from other religious traditions have also engaged with Wittgenstein (see, for instance, Talal Asad (2020) and Eugene Borowitz (2006)).

are purely ‘expressive’ – that is to say, they express our attitudes to various things, but are entirely devoid of factual content (non-cognitivism).<sup>18</sup>

Such readings, however, are seriously at odds not just with what Wittgenstein says about religious belief but with much of his later philosophy. As should already be apparent from the overview previously offered, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is in the business of challenging the orthodox categories and terms of engagement, so we shouldn’t be surprised if Wittgenstein’s actual view cannot be made to fit onto either side of a dichotomy that may well turn out to present us with a false picture of how to construe religious belief. Rather than cleaving to this false dichotomy, therefore, what I intend to show in the remaining sections is that what Wittgenstein offers us instead is an important ‘third way’<sup>19</sup> of understanding religious belief – one that does not fall into the trap of either assimilating religious beliefs to ordinary empirical (or meta-empirical) beliefs or seeking to reduce them to the expression of certain attitudes or forms of life. For, on the reading that I offer, attitude and content are one – neither can be understood, or made sense of, in isolation from the other.

The strategy I adopt is as follows. Building on some of the themes already articulated, I aim to show how Wittgenstein’s view undermines the following three misconceptions about religious belief:

- (1) The word ‘God’ is the name of a super-empirical entity.
- (2) It is possible to investigate whether God exists as one would investigate a scientific hypothesis or theory.
- (3) The meaning of religious concepts can be understood in isolation from religious practice.

Clearly, all three claims are closely connected. Nonetheless, I will devote a separate section to each, showing why the notion is mistaken and what ramifications this has. In the penultimate section, I will address remaining objections to Wittgenstein’s view, such as the ‘incommensurability’ charge and the

<sup>18</sup> Although there are scholars who have questioned this distinction (e.g. Clack, 1996; Burley 2018), the difficulty of extricating oneself from it can be seen in the fact that Clack (1996, 1999), for example, on the one hand criticizes the instrumentalist reductionism implicit in expressivism (Clack, 1996), but on the other hand ends up forgetting his own lesson when he claims that Wittgenstein’s later conception of religious belief implies atheism (Clack, 1999), as it gets rid of the metaphysical content of religion. The notion that the ‘content’ of religious belief can only be cashed out in metaphysical terms, and otherwise reduces to the expression of emotional attitudes or primitive reactions (Mackie, 1982; Clack, 1999; Schröder, 2007; Haldane 2007, 2008), is precisely the view that this book seeks to undermine. Also see Burley (2012, 2018) for a good critical discussion of Clack, and Burley (2008) for a response to Haldane.

<sup>19</sup> I first articulated such a conception in Schönbaumsfeld (2007).