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Experience and Religious Belief: Wittgenstein's Epistemology of Religion*

Abstract: In this paper, we defend the view that, although Wittgenstein does not present an epistemology of religion in the sense of the term most commonly found in traditional philosophical texts, he does explore a different understanding of religious epistemology – one that aligns the religious attitude with a particular form of *know-how*.

1. Believing in God?

Traditional epistemology of religion has dedicated much of its efforts to producing arguments for or against the existence of God – that is, arguments for rationally justifying or undermining belief in God on the basis of *a priori* reasoning (e.g. the Ontological argument) or *a posteriori* empirical evidence (e.g. the Design argument, problem of evil, theodicies, etc.).¹ Understood in this way, it seems clear that Wittgenstein advances no epistemology of religion, but, rather, a radical critique of it. In the *Tractatus*, for instance, he writes:

How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world. (TLP 1963: 6.432)

This entry indicates the pointlessness of any putative *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence: there is no purpose to be served by arguments that move from the observation of a particular way in which the world is configured (*how* the world is) to the existence of a deity responsible for such a configuration.

The same verdict befalls *a priori* proofs of God's existence. This is clearly one of the upshots of Wittgenstein's early discussion of the role of logic, in particular of

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¹ See Anselm 1965; Aquinas 1920; Descartes 1968; Hume 2007; Plantinga 1974; Swinburne 1979.

tautologies, in the *Tractatus*. As we know, Wittgenstein presents tautologies as entirely empty of content in that work:

(Here, as always, what is certain a priori proves to be something purely logical.). (TLP 1963: 6.3211)

The propositions of logic are tautologies. (TLP 1963: 6.1)

Therefore the propositions of logic say nothing. (They are the analytic propositions.) (TLP 1963: 6.11)

All theories that make a proposition of logic appear to have content are false. (TLP 1963: 6.111)

This disdain for rational proofs of God's existence remains a constant throughout Wittgenstein's life. In his 1938 "Lectures on Religion", he describes Father O'Hara as "one of those people who make it [i.e. religious belief] a question of science", someone who is trying to base his faith on reasons and who, as a result, "is cheating himself" (LA 1966: 60 and 62). And, in 1950, one year before his death, Wittgenstein makes the following remark, captured by von Wright in *Culture and Value*:

A proof of God ought really to be something by means of which you can convince yourself of God's existence. But I think that *believers* who offered such proofs wanted to analyse & make a case for their 'belief' with their intellect, although they themselves would never have arrived at belief by way of such proofs. (VB 1998: 97; MS 174: 1v, 1950)

By the time he makes this remark in 1950, Wittgenstein is no longer merely concerned that seeking such proofs of God in the world is counterproductive, since "God does not reveal himself *in* the world". He has, in addition, reached the conclusion that no such proof could, in practice, generate religious belief. Acquiring a faith simply does not involve responding to proofs. Indeed, the psychology of faith works precisely in reverse: instead of proofs giving rise to faith, we find that faith can generate a search for proofs.

It is worth noting that, in the above-quoted remark, Wittgenstein highlights the term "*believers*" and puts the word "belief" in inverted commas. This is significant. Here, as in his *Lectures on Religion*, he is trying to draw our attention to a particular feature of religious belief, one that can become easily obscured as a result of linguistic confusion. In his personal diaries (later published under the title of "Movements of Thought"), we can thus find the following remark, dated 19th April 1937:

I believe: the word "believing" has wrought horrible havoc in religion. All the knotty thoughts about the 'paradox' of the eternal meaning of a historical fact and the like! (DB 2003: 247; MS. 183: 238)

“The horrible havoc” that the word “believing” has wrought in religion is that of leading us to think that religious belief is akin to other types of belief – in particular, to opinions or conjectures – and that, as such, religious belief requires justification on the basis of evidence or proofs. This confusion results from assuming that the grammar of the word “belief” is the same in religious contexts (e.g. “I believe that God exists”) as in ordinary and scientific contexts (e.g. “I believe that there is Student Advocate in my university” or “I believe that in the Wolff 1061 system there is a planet that could harbour life”). Proper attention to the phenomenon of religious belief reveals, however, that this is not so.

This goes to explain Wittgenstein’s lack of interest in the proofs of God’s existence that can be found in different philosophical traditions: such proofs are, in his view, predicated on a confused understanding of the nature of religious belief. Or, to put it differently: the kind of religiosity that is personally – and indeed ethically – appealing to Wittgenstein is one that has no logical space for such proofs.

A question arises naturally at this point: given the potential for confusion, would it not be best to *abandon* the use of the term “belief” in religious contexts? Should we not simply stop speaking of, for instance, believing in God? At times, Wittgenstein appears to suggest this very move. For instance, in a diary entry from 1937, immediately after the above quoted remark, he writes:

But if instead of “belief in Christ” you would say: “love of Christ,” the paradox vanishes, that is, the irritation of the intellect. What does religion have to do with such a tickling of the intellect. (DB 2003: 247)

However, he then cautiously pulls away from this conclusion:

(For someone or another this too may belong to their religion.) (DB 2003: 247)

Whilst not advocating that we should abandon talk of belief in the religious context, Wittgenstein wishes to emphasise that religious belief radically differs from other doxastic states, in so far as it does not admit of everyday and scientific proofs or evidence. And if religious belief can be said to arise from experience at all, it does so in a manner altogether different from that commonly associated with ordinary or scientific belief:

“Convincing someone of God's existence” is something you might do by means of a certain upbringing, shaping his life in such & such a way.

Life can educate you to “believing in God”. And *experiences* too are what do this but not visions, or other sense experiences, which show us the “existence of this being”, but e.g. sufferings of various sorts. And they do not show us God as a sense experience does an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us.
So perhaps it is similar to the concept ‘object’. (VB 1998: 97; MS 174: 1v, 1950)

Hence, although we can continue using phrases such as “belief in God”, we should be careful, in so doing, not to fall prey to the confusion that potentially results from superficial similarities in language.

In this first section, we have therefore shown that Wittgenstein cannot be regarded as exploring, let alone advancing, an epistemology of religion, if by this we understand the study of knowledge that involves evaluating the justification of beliefs on the basis of evidence or of proofs. Religiosity – at least, the kind of religiosity of interest to Wittgenstein – simply does not fit this mould. As we will now see, however, Wittgenstein is interested in an altogether different understanding of religious epistemology, one more closely associated to the idea of *know-how*.

2. Wittgenstein's conception of epistemology

In his “Notes on Logic”, Wittgenstein’s earliest set of philosophical writings available to us, he writes:

In philosophy there are no deductions: *it* is purely descriptive.

Philosophy gives no pictures of reality.

Philosophy can neither confirm nor confute scientific investigation.

Philosophy consists of logic and metaphysics: logic is its basis.

Epistemology is the philosophy of psychology.

Distrust of grammar is the first requisite for philosophising [...]

Philosophy is the doctrine of the logical form of scientific propositions (not only of primitive propositions).

The word “philosophy” ought always to designate something over or under but not beside, the natural sciences. (TB 1961: 106)

This conception of philosophy survives into the composition of the *Tractatus*, where he writes: “Epistemology is the philosophy of psychology” (TLP 1963: 4.1121). Before we continue, we need to consider a pressing objection that arises at this point. For it is clear

that not all psychological states are cognitive in nature. Given this, however, how can Wittgenstein suggest that epistemology is the philosophy of psychology? Should psychology not be understood as the study of *all* psychological states, cognitive or otherwise? And, if so, is epistemology – i.e. the study of cognitive states – not far narrower in its scope than the philosophy of *psychology*, since psychology covers all mental states, cognitive and non-cognitive?

In order to shed light on this, let us note that the period that sees Wittgenstein writing “Notes on Logic” is also the period during which Russell is working on his *Theory of Knowledge* – work that is familiar to Wittgenstein. In this text, Russell acknowledges that not all psychological states are cognitive ones, since psychological states include “non-cognitive mental facts – feeling, emotion, volition” (Russell 1984: 22). This does not pose a problem, however, from Russell’s point of view. Non-cognitive mental facts have a legitimate place in his theory of knowledge, since *all* mental states have a cognitive relation as their basis – the cognitive relation derived from the fact that consciousness – the essence of the mental – is quite simply a relation of acquaintance between the subject and his or her mental states.

We shall employ synonymously the two words “acquaintance” and “awareness”, generally the former. Thus when *A* experiences an object *O*, we shall say that *A* is acquainted with *O* [...] A fact will be called “mental” if it contains either acquaintance or some relation presupposing acquaintance as a component. (Russell 1984: 35).

This might go some of the way to explain Wittgenstein’s claim that epistemology and the philosophy of psychology are one: if Wittgenstein accepts Russell’s view that all mental states have as their basis some cognitive relation of acquaintance, then this would explain his claim that epistemology (i.e. the philosophical study of cognition) is the philosophy of psychology (which includes also non-cognitive states).

However, a further problem arises at this point. For, if Wittgenstein genuinely holds that epistemology is the *philosophy* of psychology, why does he state, in “Notes on Logic”, that “Philosophy consists (only?) of logic and metaphysics”? Here, again, it helps to remember that Wittgenstein is developing his views against the backdrop of Russell’s work. In *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell advances that epistemology is closely related to psychology – a view that is certainly rejected by Wittgenstein, who warns, in TLP 4.1121 (where he identifies “the theory of knowledge” – i.e. epistemology – with the “Philosophy

of Psychology”): “Psychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science”.

Russell also holds during this period that epistemology is closely related to logic. Note, for instance, that his exploration of “all thought whose expression involves *propositions*” leads him to note: “a difficult and interesting problem of pure logic arises, namely the problem of enlarging the inventor of logical forms so as to include forms appropriate to the facts of epistemology” (Russell 1984: 46).

This is significant, when one takes into account that, in “Notes on Logic”, Wittgenstein describes philosophy as “the doctrine of the logical form of scientific propositions”. Wittgenstein’s claim, in “Notes on Logic”, that “Philosophy consists (only?) of logic and metaphysics” does not in fact contradict the claim that epistemology is the philosophy of psychology. For epistemology is simply, in his view, the *application* of logic to one particular area: it involves applying logic with a view to clarifying the logical form of *psychological* propositions, a task to which Wittgenstein goes on to devote the TLP 5.54ff.

3. Wittgenstein's early epistemology of religion

We are now finally in a position to shed light on what an epistemology of religion, properly understood, might look like for Wittgenstein. It would consist in the *application* of logic with a view to clarifying the logical form of religious propositions. The question is: did Wittgenstein ever explore such an epistemology?

Although we can find a number of passages relating to God in the *Notebooks*, none of these seem dedicated to the task of clarifying the logical form of religious propositions; and this aim is certainly not explicitly pursued in the *Tractatus*. Let us therefore consider Wittgenstein’s discussion of religious belief in his “Lecture on Ethics”, which, though written only in 1929, presents a number of continuities with Wittgenstein’s early position in the *Tractatus*. The discussion of miracles in the “Lecture on Ethics” shows that, by ethical, Wittgenstein means to capture the ethico-religious, the kind of religiosity that he (personally) finds ethically appealing. This notion of the *ethico-religious* – the kind of religiosity that is ethically appealing to Wittgenstein – emerges elsewhere in his writings, notably in the following remark from CV dated around the same time:

What is Good is Divine too. That, strangely enough, sums up my ethics.

Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural. (VB 1998: 5; MS 107: 192 c, 10.11.1929)

It is worth noting that, towards the end of the “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein mentions the task of attempting to provide a “logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions” (LE 2014: 50). Given our previous discussion, this would in fact be the task of trying to provide an epistemology of religion. Ultimately, however, his conclusion, as we know, is that the expression of religious experiences such as “wondering at the existence of the world”, of “feeling absolutely safe” and of “feeling guilty” are all “nonsense”.

Expressions such as “to wonder”, “to feel safe” or “to feel guilty” are senseful when used in a relative manner – that is, in a manner that implies a contrast. I might wonder at something that is now, contingently, better than it normally is (for instance, I might wonder at the unusually sunny weather in London); or I can feel contingently safe from dangers that might, in different situation, have been present (e.g. safe from the whooping cough, because I have already been through the illness); or I can feel guilty about something that I contingently caused (for instance, for crashing into the back of another car).

When I use these expressions to convey a religious experience, however, I do so in an attempt to capture an absolute, not a relative value relating to some particular facts: I wonder at the existence of the world – I wonder *that* the world exists, no matter *how* it is particularly configured; I feel absolutely safe – safe regardless of what may particularly befall me; I feel guilty – absolutely – because my entire living – not some particular subset of my experiences – seems culpable to me. (Cf. “My life has been one nasty mess so far – but need that go on indefinitely?” writes Wittgenstein to Russell from Skjolden on 3rd March 1914 [WC 2008: 70]).

These absolute “experiences” cover, to use the Tractarian expression, the totality of logical space: I wonder *that* the world exists – *any* world within the totality of possible ones; I feel safe (or guilty) in the face of *any* – i.e. *all* – possibilities that life might throw at me. In this respect, absolute experiences are reminiscent of tautologies, which, as Wittgenstein notes in the *Tractatus*, allow “every possible state of affairs”. Relatedly, towards the end of the “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein admits to being tempted “to say that what I am wondering at is a tautology” and that “the same applies to the other

experience[s] which I have mentioned”; only to then add, that, of course, “it’s just nonsense to say that one is wondering at a tautology”.

A senseful proposition is one that represents a contingent state; ethical and religious propositions, in turn, are “nonsensical” in so far as they misuse language. Wittgenstein does not suggest that we should avoid or discard them, on account of their nonsensicality, however. On the contrary, he ends the “Lecture on Ethics” by noting that they are “a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule” (LE 2014).

In our view, Wittgenstein is here appealing to a distinction that is insufficiently noted in the literature, but which is key to understanding his position: the distinction between pernicious and innocuous nonsense. Nonsense is pernicious or dangerous when it originates in and generates confusion. Typically, pernicious nonsense comes about when we use words in an attempt to express a substantive content but do so in a manner that subverts this very aim. For Wittgenstein, paradigmatic instances of such pernicious nonsense can be found in traditional metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics results in nonsense because it attempts to answer, in an *a priori* manner, empirical questions that are the purview of the natural sciences (cf. BBB 1958: 35; Z 1967: §458). For Wittgenstein, traditional metaphysical questions are modelled on scientific questions concerning mechanisms. Consider for instance Wittgenstein’s discussion of metaphysical solipsism, in TLP 1963: 5.6ff. Solipsism, in this context, is the view that the subject is the necessary condition of representation and therefore of the world as given in representation. Wittgenstein suggests that this philosophical position is problematic. For it represents an attempt to answer the question ‘By virtue of what mechanism *must* representation occur?’ The question ‘By virtue of what mechanism *does* representation (as a matter of contingent fact) occur?’ is a well-formed question – it is the legitimate purview of the natural sciences, a question that might well be asked, for instance, in psychology. The metaphysical question ‘By virtue of what mechanism *must* representation occur?’, by contrast, is not. The metaphysical question presents itself as informative: it is posed as if different options might genuinely be available to us here, different possible metaphysical answers (e.g. solipsism, idealism, realism) with their corresponding different possible mechanisms (respectively: *I*, *we*, reality). This creates the impression that there is clear purpose to asking this question: the question is asked for the purpose of selecting the correct metaphysical option out of those available. This apparent purpose is subverted, however, by the suggestion that we are looking for what

must – necessarily – be the case. It would seem that we are looking for the only answer possible – that which is *necessary*; but we are doing so in a manner that presumes that different options are possible.²

Traditional metaphysics is problematic in that it attempts to bring together methodologies (from philosophy and the natural sciences) in a manner that is self-defeating: the apparent purpose of the activity falls apart in our hands. In this respect, metaphysics fails to generate a *unified* working system: there is no ‘single plan’ (TLP 1963: 6.343) at work here, since any such plan finds itself subverted. For Wittgenstein, approaches such as this pose a threat to philosophy (properly understood) and to other areas, such as ethics and religion. Most significantly for us, they also pose a threat to science itself.

Traditional philosophy – in particular metaphysics – is full of examples of pernicious or damaging nonsense for Wittgenstein. Innocuous nonsense, in contrast, is produced when we use signs to no purpose *in full awareness that our use of signs is idle*. That not all nonsense is pernicious is made clear by Wittgenstein on a number of occasions, notably at the end of the “Lecture on Ethics”, as we saw above. (On this, see also McGuinness 2002: 359, and the example of the “nonsense” postcard messages sent by Wittgenstein to Pattison – Monk 1990: 265 & Fig. 42). Nonsense is only negative when it results from and generates confusion. In particular, when we think we are using signs with a purpose, but our use defeats this putative purpose.

In the case of religious sentences, this distinction between pernicious and innocuous nonsense comes firmly to the fore. When we treat such sentences as part of *philosophical* systems, they produce ethico-religious pseudo-theories, ones that are pseudo-substantive and which inevitably subvert themselves, resulting in pernicious nonsense. Such forms of nonsense are conceptually dangerous and should be avoided. In contrast, when we treat these sentences in a manner that fully acknowledges their lack of purpose – when we adopt towards them what is for Wittgenstein the genuinely religious attitude (i.e. one devoid of means-end, instrumental considerations), then are using them in a manner that is innocuously nonsensical. When we are clear that we are uttering such sentences and contemplating the associated experiences *to no purpose*, there is nothing problematic about their nonsensicality. They then express genuine religiosity and become “a

² There are several other respects in which such metaphysical positions are self-subverting, according to the *Tractatus*. See Tejedor 2015: 73-90.

document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (LE 2014).

This duality is exemplified by Wittgenstein’s treatment of ethico-religious propositions in the *Tractatus*. As noted in other works, part of the aim of the *Tractatus* is to effect a transformation in its reader: the book aims to train our *dispositions* to speak and think away from particular forms of nonsense and, in so doing, to alter our practical understanding of the position we occupy in the world.³ This process, when successful, amounts to an ethico-religious transformation. In order to shed light on these claims, we need briefly to consider the question of the philosophical method at work in the *Tractatus*.

For Wittgenstein, philosophy aims at the clarification of language and thought. In his view, our ability to judge how (linguistic and mental) signs are used is not dependent on our being presented with a theory of language, thought or representation – and the *Tractatus* does not attempt to present us with such a theory. On the contrary, insofar as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought, we already have the ability to make apt judgements with respect to our use of signs (TLP 1963: 4.002). Hence, ‘Our problems are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete that there are’ (TLP 1963: 5.5563). Our problems are not to be resolved by getting to grips with an abstract theory of representation, for they do not stem from the lack of such a theory. Instead, our problems result from the fact that, although we already possess the know-how needed to use signs and recognise their use (insofar as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought), *our disposition to act on this know-how has become eroded by our distorting philosophical practices*.

Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language.

(They are of the same kind as the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful.)

And so it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems. (TLP 1963: 4.003)

³ There is no difficulty with the idea of causally producing a change or an effect, according to Wittgenstein, so long as we are clear that this does not involve necessary relations between facts in the absence of internal relations. So, whilst the ideas of causal necessity and of causal necessary entailment are problematic in his view, other understandings of causation are not. On this, see Tejedor 2015: 91-118.

Our failure to ‘understand the logic of our language’ is not the kind of failure that results from the unavailability of an abstract theory of language; it is a failure in our *practical understanding*, a failure in our disposition to use linguistic and mental signs in certain ways. It is our disposition to *act* – in particular, to *use* signs – that needs to be corrected. And, for Wittgenstein, only an *activity* can help correct such a floundering disposition to act. In his view, philosophy – properly understood – is precisely such an *activity*:

The object [purpose – ‘Zweck’ in the original] of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

The result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions”, but to make propositions clear.

Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred. (TLP 1963: 4.112)

The aim of philosophical activity is to enable us to fine-tune our thinking and linguistic abilities, to orient our dispositions to use mental and linguistic signs away from the production of philosophical nonsense and towards the production of senseful pictures. Ideally, this philosophical task would be performed in a face-to-face, interpersonal, dialectical manner, so that our individual dispositions to produce nonsense (the dispositions that each of us – philosophers – has to produce nonsense in particular ways) could be worked on as soon as they broke surface:⁴

The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method. (TLP 1963: 6.53)

Since such a direct approach is not always possible, however, Wittgenstein produces a ‘machine’ – the *Tractatus* – that aims to achieve a similar result. This ‘machine’ is intended to be similarly interactive: it engages the reader in an internal dialogue, similar

⁴ On this, see McGuinness 2012: 264-265.

to that which would take place in the more direct approach.⁵ Implicit here is the idea that it is only by personally engaging in such a dialectic struggle that the required transformation – a transformation in our *dispositions* to use signs – can be achieved. The *Tractatus* ‘machine’ uses a number of techniques to this purpose: some of its propositions serve as direct instructions that aim to recall us to a know-how we already possess (e.g. TLP 1963: 2.21);⁶ others present us with nonsensical puzzles against which we can test our thinking and linguistic abilities.⁷ In both cases, the aim is to help us identify our philosophical dispositions – our personal vulnerabilities – towards nonsense so as to loosen the hold it has on us.

4. Wittgenstein's Later Epistemology of Religion

From 1929 onwards, Wittgenstein’s approach to language, logic and philosophy itself begin to shift, notably with the adoption of the “ethnological approach” to philosophical problems. He writes:

If we use the ethnological approach does that mean we are saying philosophy is ethnology? No it only means we are taking up our position far outside, in order to see the things *more objectively*. (VB 1998: 45; MS 162b: 67r, 2.7.1940)

One of my most important methods is to imagine a historical development of our ideas different from what has actually occurred. If we do that the problem shows us a quite new side. (VB 1998: 45; MS 162b: 68v, 14.8.1940)

The evidence from both the *Nachlass* and the lectures he gives in the summer of 1938 shows that, around this time, Wittgenstein begins to explore the question of religious belief in a more direct, explicit manner which nevertheless shows some clear continuities

⁵ This is also highlighted in Floyd 1998: 82.

⁶ Propositions that provide us with instructions (or ‘instruction-propositions’) are not regarded by Wittgenstein as nonsensical, as is shown by his treatment of the principles of the natural sciences in the *Tractatus*. See Tejedor 2015: 91-118 and 119-137.

⁷ This notion of a *puzzle* draws on Cora Diamond’s notion of a *riddle*, but differs from the latter in key respects. See Diamond 1991 and Tejedor 2015: 156–68.

with his earlier understanding of ethico-religious epistemology. In the 1938 *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he writes:

If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of. One said, had to say, that one believed in the existence, and if one did not believe, this was regarded as something bad. Normally if I did not believe in the existence of something no one would think there was anything wrong in this. (LA 1966: 59)

Also, there is this extraordinary use of the word 'believe'. One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn't use 'believe' as one does ordinarily. You might say (in the normal use): "You only believe-oh well. . . ." Here it is used entirely differently; on the other hand it is not used as we generally use the word 'know'. (LA 1966: 59-60)

This brings to the fore one of the characteristics of the religiosity. In ordinary contexts, the use of the verb "to believe" implies less certainty than the use of the verb "to know" as we can see if we contrast "I believe that there is an exam tomorrow" and "I know that there is an exam tomorrow". This feature is absent in the case of religious experiences, however:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near.

It isn't a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane, which you could express by saying: "You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein." (LA 1966: 53)

And yet, as discussed earlier, the strength of our religious commitment cannot be based on the kind of *evidence* that pertains in other contexts. Wittgenstein considers here the possibility that religious beliefs might be based on *some* form of evidence but argues that, if they were, the evidence in question would have to be altogether different from that which would be admissible in a scientific or ordinary epistemic enquiry:

Suppose someone dreamt of the Last Judgement, and said he now knew what it would be like... If you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone could soberly argue: "Well. I had this dream . . . therefore . . . Last Judgement". You might say: "For a blunder, that's too big." (LA 1966: 61-62)

Indeed, a belief that is justified on the basis of the kind of evidence that would be admissible in the ordinary or scientific contexts would simply not count as religious.

These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons....

The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business.

Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me.

Suppose, for instance, we knew people who foresaw the future; make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they described some sort of a Judgement Day. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, and even if it were more convincing than I have described, belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief. (LA 1966: 56)

For the late Wittgenstein, the grammar of religious language is altogether different from the grammar of scientific or ordinary knowledge language, just as for the early Wittgenstein, religious experience is, from the point of view of logic, altogether different from psychological experiences with a cognitive content.

Those who said: "Well, possibly it may happen and possibly not" would be on an entirely different plane.

This is partly why one would be reluctant to say: "These people rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement". "Opinion" sounds queer.

It is for this reason that different words are used: 'dogma', 'faith'.

We don't talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing. (LA 1966: 56-57).

In spite of the differences between Wittgenstein's early and late approaches to religious belief and experience, important points of continuity remain. In particular, religious beliefs and experiences retain, throughout his life, the holistic, all-encompassing dimension that invites, in "Lecture on Ethics", a comparison to tautologies. In his later writings, this dimension is rendered in terms of their whole-life-encompassing quality:

Suppose somebody made this guidance for this life: believing in the Last Judgment. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not?

Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has proof.

But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life. (LA 1966: 53-54)

This remarks echoes the *Notebooks* entry dated 29th of July 1916 (reproduced in TLP 1963: 6.43), to the effect that: "...it is also clear that the world of the happy is a different world from the world of the unhappy".

The later Wittgenstein puts this by saying that the life of the non-religious person is altogether different from that of the believer, in so far as the *attitudes* that permeate their lives are different:

But what is the difference between an attitude and an opinion? I would like to say: the attitude comes *before* the opinion. (*Isn't belief in God an attitude?*) (LW 1982: 38)

In conclusion, we have seen that, for Wittgenstein, the epistemology of religion should focus, not on trying to justify *particular* religious beliefs and propositions on the basis of *a posteriori* evidence or *a priori* proofs, but in developing a dispositional form of *know-how* that affects the *totality* of our language and thoughts (including beliefs and experiences). Insofar as the know-how in question is involved in the application of logic to thought and language in their *totality*, it operates a complete world shift on the faithful. The ethico-religious attitude operates, not by rendering more salient particular thoughts or propositions at the expense of others, but by changing the world of the faithful, as given in language and thought, in its totality. In this respect, it is "absolute" (LE 2014).⁸

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