

# Disagreement and Picture in Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on Religious Belief'

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## 1 Introduction

In 1938 in Cambridge, Wittgenstein gave a lecture course on belief. One part of the course discussed religious belief. The lecture notes of three students who attended this part—Rush Rhees, Yorick Smythies and James Taylor—were later 'compiled' and published by Cyril Barrett S.J. under the title 'Lectures on Religious Belief' (=LRB) in the 1966 volume *Wittgenstein: Lectures & Conversations*.<sup>1</sup>

LRB is difficult to understand. It is hard to make out a central, overall train of thought; the text is fragmentary; many sentences are incomplete and un-grammatical; and it is occasionally unclear whether a given passage summarises Wittgenstein's views or those of one of the students. The fact that Barrett leaves the principles of his editing unstated further complicates the situation. It thus is easy to agree with Cora Diamond that in LRB we see Wittgenstein's position only 'through a kind of fog'.<sup>2</sup>

A text of this kind is bound to give rise to conflicting interpretations. In this paper, I shall put forward and defend a new reading of my own. It can be summarised in five claims: (1) For LRB there is no incommensurability between religious and ordinary discourses. (2) LRB allows that a non-believer can understand, without converting, the propositional attitude, and the content, of religious belief. (3) According to LRB, a non-believer can criticise religious believers: first, on the basis of the standards of the religion in question;

second, on the basis of shared general principles (e. g. that self-deception is to be avoided); and, third, on the basis of principles not shared with the believer. (4) *LRB* rules out, however, that a non-believer can criticise the propositional attitude of religious belief relying on standards that the non-believer and the believer have in common. And finally (5), for the Wittgenstein of *LRB*, a 'relativism of distance' is a permissible response to the lack of common standards between the believer and the non-believer when the very appropriateness of having attitudes of religious belief is at issue.

## 2

### Disagreement Lost

Consider what one might call 'the standard model' of a straightforward disagreement and its philosophical rendering. Jones says: 'I believe Wiener Schnitzel tastes good.' And Smith replies: 'I believe Wiener Schnitzel tastes bad.' The standard analysis tells us that Jones and Smith have picked out the same proposition (*Wiener Schnitzel tastes good*); that they both have the same propositional attitude of *belief*; but that Jones affirms the very proposition that Smith denies.

Our example can also serve as an instance of a disagreement that is 'faultless'. It is natural to think that in forming their respective beliefs about Wiener Schnitzel, neither Jones nor Smith need to have made a mistake. After all, we are, by and large, comfortable with the thought of different, equally acceptable, standards of taste. A relativism of taste has a lot of initial plausibility.

Needless to say, in other areas we are less willing to countenance relativistic possibilities. Assume that Jones asserts 'I believe that  $68+57=125$ ', and Smith replies 'I believe that  $68+57=5$ '. To most of us, this does not look like a faultless disagreement. If by '+' Smith means *addition*, then the disagreement is not faultless. And if by '+' Smith refers to some other mathematical function, then he does not disagree with Jones.

With these preliminaries out the way, we can turn to the case that matters most for *LRB*. Assume Jones utters (a) and Smith (b):

- (a) I believe there will be a Last Judgement.
- (b) I believe there won't be a Last Judgement.

I suspect that most of us would be inclined to think that Jones and Smith disagree and that their disagreement is not faultiness.

Enter the Wittgenstein of *LRB*. He confesses not to have the belief expressed by (a). He goes on to insist that not having the belief expressed by (a) does not commit him to having the belief expressed by (b). And he concludes that he does not disagree—at least not in any standard sense of disagreement—with the believer who utters (a):

Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: "not at all, or not always." [...] "Do you contradict the man?" I'd say: "No."<sup>3</sup>

Why does Wittgenstein think that not having the belief expressed by (a) does not commit him to having the belief expressed by (b)? *Prima facie* Wittgenstein seems to give two justifications. The first turns on the idea of two different uses of 'believe' and thus on the idea of two different propositional belief-attitudes. The second justification appears to focus on Wittgenstein's difficulties in grasping the propositional content of (a), and thus focus on his difficulties in understanding the meaning of the term 'Last Judgement'. I shall now develop both options in a little more detail.

*LRB* distinguishes between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' uses of 'belief', and thus between ordinary and extraordinary belief-attitudes. Ordinary belief-attitudes are found in empirical and scientific beliefs; extraordinary belief-attitudes are characteristic of religious beliefs.<sup>4</sup> *LRB* allows that one and the same proposition—for instance, *that there will be a Last Judgment*—can serve as the propositional content for both an extraordinary and for an ordinary belief-attitude: '... people who ... make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they describ[e] some sort of Judgement Day. ... [such] belief ... wouldn't be at all a religious belief.'<sup>5</sup>

Wittgenstein draws his students' attention to five central features of ordinary beliefs. First, 'opinion', 'view', or 'hypothesis' are everyday words for ordinary beliefs. Second, ordinary beliefs can be measured as more or less reasonable, that is, as more or less well supported by evidence. Third, mere ordinary beliefs compare unfavourably with knowledge. The rational person will usually aim to obtain the evidence needed for turning his ordinary belief into knowledge. Fourth, 'I am not sure', or 'possibly' are often appropriate

responses to someone else's expression of an ordinary belief. And fifth, ordinary beliefs do not normally have the power to make us change our lives.<sup>6</sup>

Extraordinary beliefs differ from ordinary beliefs in all these respects. 'Faith' and 'dogma' rather than 'opinion' and 'hypothesis' are the non-technical terms commonly used for extraordinary beliefs; extraordinary beliefs are not on the scale of being confirmed or falsified by empirical evidence; although extraordinary beliefs are the 'firmest' of all beliefs, they are not candidates for knowledge; they are tied to strong emotions and pictures; they guide people's life; and their expression can be the culmination of a form of life.<sup>7</sup>

Wittgenstein says surprisingly little regarding connections and comparisons between ordinary and extraordinary beliefs. What he does mention is that the two kinds of beliefs have entirely different connections, and that in the case of other cultures we might find it difficult to separate ordinary and extraordinary beliefs from each other. He also notes that an extraordinary belief can block or overturn even a very well supported ('indubitable') ordinary belief. But he says nothing on the question whether there is a common core for, or similarities or inferential links between, the two uses of 'belief'.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, Wittgenstein's first explanation for why he cannot contradict the religious believer who utters (a) (= I believe that there will be a Last Judgement) is the following. (a) involves the propositional attitude of extraordinary belief. Wittgenstein does not have this attitude in his repertoire of propositional attitudes. Moreover, if 'believe' in (b) (= I believe that there won't be a Last Judgement) is taken as ordinary belief, then (b) does not contradict (a). Using the non-technical terms for the two types of attitudes, (a) becomes (a\*) and (b) (b\*) :

- (a\*) I have faith that there will be a Last Judgement.
- (b\*) I have the hypothesis that there won't be ...

Wittgenstein holds that someone could coherently have both the belief expressed by (a\*) and the belief expressed (b\*).

I now turn to the second explanation for why Wittgenstein feels unable to contradict the believer in a Last Judgement. Previous interpreters have seen this explanation as central. On this account, Wittgenstein is unable to pick out the propositional contents of religious beliefs since he cannot translate religious language into his own. Put differently, the languages of the believer and the non-believer are, in important respects, incommensurable.

There is some support for such a reading in the text. Wittgenstein says that he 'has no thoughts' about key religious themes, or that he lacks the believers 'pictures'. The later point is pertinent here since *LRB* also stresses that it is religious pictures that give religious terms their meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, in what follows I shall argue that ultimately *LRB* is not endorsing the incommensurability proposal. The only reason why Wittgenstein is principally unable to disagree (in the standard sense of disagreement) with the believer in the Last Judgement is that Wittgenstein lacks extraordinary belief-attitudes. But this lack does not prevent him from learning the meaning of religious language. The key tool in this undertaking is grammatical investigation. As a result Wittgenstein is able to pick out the propositional content towards which the believer takes the attitude of extraordinary belief.

### 3

#### **Conflicting Interpretations I: The Meaning of Religious Terms**

The best-known advocate of an incommensurability thesis regarding Wittgenstein's views on religion is of course Kai Nielsen.<sup>10</sup> I shall discuss Nielsen's 'fideist' reading later in this paper. At this point it seems more instructive to focus on Cyril Barrett's *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief* (1991) and Genia Schönbaumsfeld's *A Confusion of the Spheres* (2007).<sup>11</sup> Neither of them pays attention to the distinction between what I have called the 'first' and the 'second explanation' above. Both concentrate on the 'second'.

Barrett and Schönbaumsfeld hold that for Wittgenstein religious language involves a 'reorientation' of ordinary language. Moreover, they imply that the non-believer can come to grasp the meaning of religious language only by converting. And they suggest that the non-believer suffers from a kind of conceptual aspect-blindness. Barrett writes that for 'a believer [religious terms] have a meaning that transcends ordinary employment of language ...'<sup>12</sup> He goes on to ask whether the non-believer 'can ... be said to suffer from aspect-blindness?', and answers with a qualified 'yes': 'In a sense, yes ... He fails to see what the believer sees ... "their eyes they have closed: lest at any time they should see with their eyes ... and be converted" (Matthew 13, 15) ...'<sup>13</sup> Schönbaumsfeld notes that 'a "conceptual reorientation" ... happens in

religious contexts ... God move[s] the religious believer to use the words "father" or "fatherly love" almost as new words.<sup>14</sup>

Barrett accepts that on his reading a religious term like 'father' 'cannot be translated into its ordinary use.'<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly enough, given the passage just quoted, Schönbaumsfeld nevertheless does not wish to attribute the incommensurability thesis to Wittgenstein:

Religious discourse cannot ... be 'self-contained' or 'sealed off' from other linguistic 'domains', for it is precisely the quotidian senses of words that make possible the 'renewed' uses or applications of these words in religious contexts. In this respect, religious discourse, like artistic language-use, involves an *extension* or *transformation* of everyday discourse and consequently can't be 'incommensurable' with it.<sup>16</sup>

I am not convinced. First, the fact that religious discourse 'renews' ordinary words does not establish that this discourse is translatable into those words. Arguably Einstein's concept of mass 'renews' Newton's concept—and yet, this is the paradigm case of incommensurability in the history of science. Second, if it needs God's intervention to give the religious believer 'almost new words', then what—short of a conversion—can enable the non-believer to understand these words? Third, Schönbaumsfeld's parallel between artistic and religious language-use does not seem apt for demonstrating commensurability of religious and everyday language. 'God is the father' is not sufficiently like 'Juliet is the sun'. By Schönbaumsfeld's own criteria grasping religious discourse for the first time amounts to a fundamental change in form of life. Understanding an artistic metaphor surely does not (or only in extremely rare circumstances).

My main goal in the next section is to argue that the central passages of *LRB* contradict the incommensurability reading. But it might be useful to indicate however briefly already here that there is also peripheral internal as well as external evidence against this reading.

The peripheral internal evidence—internal to *LRB*—is the following passage:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." ... 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."  
The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning.<sup>17</sup>

The last sentence is the key statement here: in order to understand Wittgenstein's response to the believer in the Last Judgement we might not have to invoke considerations relating to meaning. But if that is true then incommensurability cannot be the central explanation.<sup>18</sup>

The preliminary or peripheral *external* evidence against incommensurability in Wittgenstein are remarks from 1930, 1931, and 1946 respectively:

A language that I do not understand is no language.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the language that I might construct, it has to be translatable into an existing language.<sup>20</sup>

It is an important fact that we assume it is always possible to teach our language to men who have a different one.<sup>21</sup>

Someone who insists on translatability as a criterion for something being a language is not going to make an exception for religious language.

#### 4

### The Disagreements between Smythies and Wittgenstein

The central evidence in *LRB* against the incommensurability of religious and ordinary discourses is to be found in the two debates between Yorick Smythies and Wittgenstein. The first controversy culminates in Wittgenstein accusing Smythies of being 'muddled'; the climax of the second confrontation is Wittgenstein's calling Smythies' view 'rubbish'. On my reading, in the first disagreement Wittgenstein insists that religious discourse depends on ordinary discourse. And in the second dispute he shows how grammatical investigations enable non-believers to come to understand religious language.

A couple of words on Yorick Smythies (1917–1980) seem appropriate at this point. Smythies was probably the main note-taker for *LRB* (he comes first in Barrett's list). He was one of Wittgenstein's favourite students and followed his teacher's advice not to become a philosopher. He became a librarian

in Oxford instead. In 1944 he converted to Catholicism, an event that Wittgenstein commented on in an important letter (that I shall use later in this paper).<sup>22</sup> Most important for our concerns, however, is the fact that in 1945 Smythies returned to Cambridge to give a talk on 'Meaning' in the Moral Sciences Club with Wittgenstein in the chair. In his paper Smythies defended private 'acts of meaning'. The secretary of the Club, Elizabeth Anscombe, produced the following summary:

Mr Smythies put the question what happens in my mind when I say "draughts" and mean "chess". He thought that there must be an act of meaning "chess" which could not be identified either with possible mental accompaniments of saying "draughts", or with surrounding circumstances, such as my behaviour before and after. It did not seem to him to be a nonsensical supposition that at the time of reading his paper he meant by its sentences the sentences of a quite different paper, e. g. one on Moore's paradox, though he had no memory of this later, and gave no sign of it at the time.<sup>23</sup>

I submit that Smythies 1945-paper continued the first 1938-controversy between Smythies and Wittgenstein. Unfortunately, we do not know directly which view Smythies advanced in 1938; all we have is Wittgenstein's response. But if we assume that Smythies defended in 1938 roughly the same view that he argued for in 1945, and if additionally we take it that Smythies in 1938 put forward this view with special reference to religious language, then the pieces of *LRB* fall into place. Reconstructed and slightly regimented, Smythies' 1938-position comes to this:

- (a) An individual (= *i*) can privately assign any meaning to a sign-vehicle.
- (b) *i* alone then knows what *i* means by that sign.
- (c) *i* can introspect the meaning in one moment of time (i. e. without considering a practice or technique of use).
- (d) A referential term introduced in this way has one unique determinate interpretation, independently of a practice.

No-one who is familiar with the general outlines of Wittgenstein's later philosophy will be surprised by his response to Smythies' position. Thus Wittgenstein rejects the idea of signs that can be interpreted in only one way as based on a muddled 'idea of a super-picture', that is, a picture with

one unique method of projection. Moreover, the religious believer must take his starting point from the practices and techniques of ordinary language. Only against this backdrop can he introduce religious pictures and narratives in terms of which he expresses and formulates his religious beliefs. The pictures, including the techniques for their use, can be explained to others, non-believers and believers alike.

The idea of super-picture is the central muddle:

The first idea ... is that you are looking at your own thought, and are absolutely sure that it is a thought that so and so. ... It seems to be a super-picture. ... With a picture, it still depends on the method of projection, whereas here it seems that you get rid of the projecting relation ... Smythies's muddle is based on the idea of a super-picture.<sup>24</sup>

The following three short passages point out the importance of public techniques of usage. Like any speaker, so also the religious believer, is unable to sidestep these techniques:

"... I know what I mean" ... It looked as though you could talk of understanding a word, without any reference to the technique of its usage. ...

We are all here using the word "death", which is a public instrument, which has a whole technique [of usage]. ... If you treat this [your idea] as something private, with what right are you calling it an idea of death? ...

If what he calls his "idea of death" is to become relevant, it must become part of our game.<sup>25</sup>

And finally, Wittgenstein gives an example of someone who teaches him to understand the meaning of a quasi-religious term, 'not ceasing to exist after death', by way of a picture:

I haven't any clear idea what I'm saying when I'm saying "I don't cease to exist," etc.

Spiritualists make one kind of connection. A Spiritualist says "Apparition" etc. Although he gives me a picture I don't like, I do get a clear idea.<sup>26</sup>

Turning from Smythies 'muddle' to his 'rubbish', here we are concerned in more detail with the relationship between religious pictures, religious

language, and grammar. The key is the following much-debated passage that I shall quote in an abbreviated form:

[Wittgenstein:] “‘God’s eye sees everything’—I want to say of this that it uses a picture. ... We associate a particular use with a picture.’

Smythies: ‘This isn’t all he does—associate a use with a picture.’

Wittgenstein: ‘Rubbish. I meant: what conclusions are you going to draw? etc. Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God? ... If I say he used a picture, I don’t want to say anything he himself wouldn’t say. ... The whole *weight* may be in the picture. ... I’m merely making a *grammatical* remark ... .’<sup>27</sup>

The passage raises two major questions of interpretation: What worried Smythies about Wittgenstein’s claim ‘We associate a particular use with a picture’? And what annoyed Wittgenstein about Smythies’ remark ‘This isn’t all he does—associate a use with a picture’? An answer to the second question must also explain Wittgenstein’s point in invoking the ‘weight’ of pictures and in referring to grammar.

Concerning both questions I want to motivate my own responses by showing that the to-date best answers are not (fully) satisfactory. I am thinking here of the discussions in Hilary Putnam’s *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), Cora Diamond’s ‘The Gulf between Us’ (2005), and Genia Schönbaumsfeld’s *A Confusion of the Spheres* (2007).<sup>28</sup>

All three authors are in full agreement regarding Smythies’ worry about the ‘using a picture’ proposal. Putnam takes Smythies to think that on Wittgenstein’s suggestion ‘religious language is non-cognitive’. Diamond has Smythies object to Wittgenstein’s alleged reduction of religion to ‘expressing a resolve to live in a certain way’. And Schönbaumsfeld approvingly cites Diamond’s rendering.<sup>29</sup>

There is a bit more variety with respect to Wittgenstein’s sentence ‘the whole weight might be in the picture’. Putnam suggests that it is best understood in light of a diary entry of 1949: ‘... we *always* eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all of our thinking is to be respected ...’.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the weighty picture is the *fundamental* picture. Diamond sides with Putnam in emphasising the relevance and importance of the 1949 comment. But she also introduces a further thought which she finds in theologians such as Franz

Rosenzweig, Kornelis Miskotte and Helmut Gollwitzer. This is the idea that the religious picture is weighty insofar as it enables us speak to God as person. The weighty picture is 'the anthropomorphic picture-language, used of God'. God 'makes [this picture] available for us to use in speaking of him'. This picture is inescapable since it alone enables the believer to talk about and to God, and to listen to him.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Schönbaumsfeld captures Wittgenstein's thought by writing that the 'the picture is [not] instrumentally intersubstitutable', that it is 'irreplaceable / non-paraphrasable'.<sup>32</sup>

I am not convinced by the three authors' interpretation of Smythies' worry. Why should the idea that religion centrally involves the use of pictures commit Wittgenstein to a non-cognitivist view of religion? How can the non-cognitivist understanding of religion be Smythies' central concern when non-cognitivism had already been explicitly rejected by Wittgenstein earlier in *LRB*?<sup>33</sup> And, most importantly, how can a reference to the weightiness of pictures alleviate Smythies' discomfort? If making the use of pictures central to religion commits one to non-cognitivism, why does the use of *weighty* pictures cancel out this commitment? Unfortunately, Putnam, Diamond and Schönbaumsfeld do not address these questions.

Here is a different and simpler reading of Smythies' worry. Smythies fears that Wittgenstein is putting forward a *reductive* account of religion: that religion is *nothing but* the manipulation of pictures. And this is unacceptable to Smythies. Such reductive account, he thinks, ignores the essence of religion, that is, the relationship between the believer and God. As we shall see in a moment, on this interpretation it is not difficult to see why the weightiness of religious pictures constitutes a response to Smythies' 'rubbish'.

Turning to our three interpreters' proposals on the weightiness of the pictures, I have already indirectly indicated my main objection in the last paragraph. If I am right about Smythies' worry, then it is not clear how an insistence on either the fundamental character, or the anthropomorphic nature, of the weighty picture provides a remedy. I also miss in all three authors a detailed attention to Wittgenstein's reference to grammar. And, last but not least, I am uncomfortable with the hermeneutic strategy of interpreting a 1938 text via a 1949 comment, or via the work of three theologians that Wittgenstein probably never read.

My own interpretation starts from the fact that Wittgenstein presents his observations about the role of pictures in religion as 'a grammatical remark'. This is not, of course, the first and only time that Wittgenstein connects

religion and grammar. For instance, the well-known § 373 of the *Philosophical Investigations* reads:

Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)<sup>34</sup>

As we know from Alice Ambrose's and G. E. Moore's notes on a lecture course from 1932–33, Wittgenstein had been interested in the link between theology and grammar at least from the early 1930s onwards.<sup>35</sup> Here I prefer to focus on a later passage, both because of its length and richness, and because of its temporal proximity to the 1938 lecture course on religious belief. The passage I am referring to is a diary entry from February 1937:

One kneels down & looks up & folds one's hands & speaks, & one says one speaks with God, one says that God sees everything that I do; one says God speaks to me in my *heart*; one speaks of the eyes, the hand, the mouth of God, but not of the other parts of the body: Learn from this the grammar of the word "God"! [I read somewhere, Luther had written that theology is the "grammar of the word of God", of the holy scripture.]<sup>36</sup>

These lines help with understanding § 373 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Theology is a grammar of the ways in which the religious believer speaks and thinks about God, of the actions he deems possible vis-à-vis God, and of the properties he attributes to God.

Unfortunately Wittgenstein does not tell us where he read that Luther thought of theology as the 'grammar of the word of God'. I venture the following suggestion: the source was Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), or someone writing about him. Historians of theology tell us that Luther himself never actually said that theology is the grammar of the word of God.<sup>37</sup> Something close to this expression was however used by Hamann with reference to Luther. In one place Hamann wrote that 'it was a religious scholar of penetrating wit who called theology a grammar for the language of the holy scripture', and in another place he professed to 'follow Luther in turning the whole of φφy (= philosophy) into a grammar'. The second quote makes it likely that Luther is the 'religious scholar of penetrating wit' mentioned in the first.<sup>38</sup>

Be this as it may, for present concerns it is most important to note that 'theology as grammar' offers a method for how the non-believer can come

to understand the language of the religious believer. The non-believer needs to study carefully the religious narratives and rituals, and he needs to identify and tabulate the various descriptions, intentions and actions involved in these narratives and rituals. In this way he can learn both the use of the (literal and metaphorical) pictures and the meanings of religious terms. Moreover, the purpose of this investigation is not to reduce or criticize religion; the purpose is to understand it. No wonder then that Wittgenstein felt seriously misunderstood when Smythies implicitly accused him of reducing religion to a mere manipulation of pictures.

As concerns the meaning of Wittgenstein's 'the whole weight may be in the picture' it also helps to take the Hamann connection seriously. Recall that, on my reading, Smythies insisted that a view that reduces religion to the use of pictures misses its most important aspect: the relationship between the religious believer and God. Wittgenstein's response to this criticism was to say that anyone who draws the contrast between the two ideas (of the pictures and of the relationship) in this way must assume that the pictures are of little weight. On Wittgenstein's rendering of the role of pictures and narratives in religion they do not stand in the way of a relationship with God. On the contrary, they *are essential* to that relationship. This view is clearly expressed in the following passage from Hamann:

... the miracles that the word of God does in the soul of pious Christians ... are as great as the miracles narrated in it; an understanding of this book and faith in its contents can only be reached through the very spirit that has moved its authors; and the ineffable sighs that this spirit causes in our hearts are of the very same nature as the inexpressible pictures heaped up ... in the holy scripture.<sup>39</sup>

For Hamann the holy scripture is not just a report on God's deeds, it is first and foremost a divine action towards us. We understand the bible only because God enables us to do so; and the text and our reaction to it are of one piece. In other words, for Hamann the bible is a weighty picture because it is the picture through which God relates to us, and we to him.

## 5

### **Implications: Criticism, Faultlessness, Relativism of Distance**

One central strand of the debate over Wittgenstein's views on religion has been the question whether Wittgenstein allows the non-believer any form of rational criticism of religious belief and doctrine. In the remainder of this paper I want to explain what answer emerges from my interpretation of *LRB*.

In addressing this question it is crucial to distinguish between different cases and scenarios. A first type of situation in which Wittgenstein allows outsiders to criticise religion are cases where the believer has committed 'blunders', that is, where he has deviated from the system of assumptions and rules of his religion. Wittgenstein mentions an example early on in the lectures:

During the war, Wittgenstein saw consecrated bread being carried in chromium steel. This struck him as ludicrous.<sup>40</sup>

Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another.<sup>41</sup>

A second type of scenario in which outside criticism of religion is possible and unproblematic is where the religious believer can be shown to be guilty of a violation of some general topic-neutral demands, for example, the demand not to deceive himself. A case in point in *LRB* is Father O'Hara who sought to make religion acceptable to a secularised-scientific world by assimilating religious to scientific belief. His mistake is not so much a 'blunder' as a case of blindness concerning the very nature of religious belief.

Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science.<sup>42</sup>

But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself.<sup>43</sup>

The third and perhaps most noteworthy case concerns the very attitude of extraordinary belief. Wittgenstein holds that although the non-believer

might feel inclined to criticise the believer for having extraordinary attitudes, any such criticism must be ineffective. It must be ineffective since people who have, and people who do not have, extraordinary belief-attitudes do not share principles on the basis of which the very adoption of such belief-attitudes could be rationally evaluated. In the following passage Wittgenstein refers to exactly such kind of 'controversy':

These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive.<sup>44</sup>

This suggests that the attitude of extraordinary belief lies too deep for it to be subject to standards. Presumably the same applies to the stance of not having extraordinary attitudes. And thus the two stances each are internally related to different sets of reasons.

The last quotation speaks of the encounter between the religious person and someone who lacks extraordinary beliefs as a 'controversy'. This might seem to be in tension with Wittgenstein's unwillingness to call the difference between himself and the religious believer (over the question of the Last Judgement) a 'disagreement'. On closer inspection it turns out, however, that Wittgenstein does not wish to legislate whether we can use the term 'disagreement' here. Compare the following passages:

"Do you contradict the man?" I'd say: "No." ...<sup>45</sup>

... does this mean that I believe the opposite ...? ... "not at all, or not always."<sup>46</sup>

... you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we normally call believing the opposite.<sup>47</sup>

These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies.<sup>48</sup>

It seems to me that these varying statements are best understood in light of §79 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts.' Not much hinges on whether we use the term 'disagreement' for Wittgenstein's distance from the believer who asserts his belief in the Last Judgement. What is important is to understand

the peculiarity of this kind of distance, and how it differs from more familiar or standard forms of disagreement.

I therefore propose the term 'non-standard faultless disagreement' to capture the special form of distance that exists between Wittgenstein and the believer. The terms 'non-standard' and 'faultless' should be clear from what has already been said. The label 'disagreement' seems appropriate at least insofar as one cannot assert, without contradiction, both (a') and (b'):

- (a') I have faith that there will be a Last Judgement, and
- (b') I lack the attitude of faith (in a Last Judgement) altogether.

Of course, the realisation that in a certain domain disagreements are (often or invariably) faultless can trigger various responses. One such response is scepticism, that is, the thought that, since we cannot rationally agree, no knowledge or justified belief is possible in this domain. Another possible response is relativism: each of us is right relative to their respective standards or stances, but there is no viewpoint from which such standards or stances themselves can be evaluated. In *LRB* Wittgenstein does not seem to be tempted by either of these views, at least not in their canonical form.

There is however a certain *non-standard* form of relativism that fits the position of *LRB*. This position is a variant of what Bernard Williams once called 'relativism of distance'.<sup>49</sup> The central element of this view is the 'notional' confrontation, that is, a confrontation in which the view of the other side is not a real or live option for oneself. One cannot imagine going over to it. Williams also says that in such confrontation one's ordinary 'vocabulary of appraisal' seems out of place: '... for a reflective person the question of appraisal does not genuinely arise ... in purely notional confrontation.'<sup>50</sup> Both features are central in Wittgenstein's encounter with the believer. Their confrontation is notional since only a conversion, and thus reordering of all real or live options, would take Wittgenstein to the religious stance. And the idea that one's vocabulary of appraisal seems out of place surfaces in Wittgenstein's insistence that in such confrontation reasons must appear inconclusive. The point is also visible in *LRB*'s repeated insistence on not wanting to express any view that might be offensive or insulting to the believer:

I couldn't approach his belief at all by saying: "This could just as well have been brought about by so and so" because he could think this blasphemy on my side.<sup>51</sup>

If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say.<sup>52</sup>

All I wished to characterize was the conventions [sic!] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant.<sup>53</sup>

## 7

### **Conflicting Interpretations III: Criticism of Belief in God**

It remains for me to contrast my reading of Wittgenstein on the criticism of religion with the best-known alternative, Kai Nielsen's 'fideist' interpretation. In a recent paper, Nielsen sums up his interpretation as follows:

... what cannot be done, on a Wittgensteinian fideist view, is relevantly to criticise belief in God (where 'God' is properly conceived) ... [T]here is ... no intelligible way of saying that the very idea of God is incoherent or that belief in God rests on an illusion or that 'God exists' is false.<sup>54</sup>

This view does not sit well with my argument above. When Wittgenstein emphasises the lack of shared standards, he is talking about the difference between a person who has extraordinary belief-attitudes, and a person who lacks them. That is to say, at issue is the presence or absence of such attitudes, at issue are not their specific contents. This leaves open the possibility of various forms of criticism—on the basis of shared standards—of particular doctrines concerning God. Note also that although criticism on the basis of shared standards is impossible in cases of non-standard faultless disagreement, Wittgenstein does not rule out critical assessments on the basis of criteria that are not shared. For instance, when Smythies informed Wittgenstein about his conversion to Catholicism in 1944, the latter replied that he had his own ways of assessing whether Smythies' move would be a success or a failure: '... what sort of man you are and will be. This will, for me, be the eating of the pudding.'<sup>55</sup> Here Wittgenstein seems little bothered by the thought that his criteria for such an evaluation might be different from the criteria employed by the believer Smythies.

## 8

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have developed a new interpretation of *LRB*. Central to my reading is the claim that there is no incommensurability between religious and ordinary discourses; that Wittgenstein offers grammar as a method for overcoming problems of understanding between believer and non-believer; that the non-believer can understand the propositional attitude and the propositional content of religious belief (without converting), and that a non-believer can criticise religious believers on various grounds. The only thing that is ruled out is a criticism, on the basis of shared standards, of the very adoption of extraordinary standards.

Needless to say, there is plenty of unfinished business. In order to make Wittgenstein's position convincing, we need a better taxonomy of different uses of 'believe'; a taxonomy of possible different forms of extraordinary beliefs (religious, magical, commitments to various forms of life); an account of similarities as well as differences between ordinary and extraordinary beliefs; and a more detailed account of why reasons give out in the defence of extraordinary beliefs.

## Notes

- 1 'Lectures on Religious Belief,' in *Wittgenstein: Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 53–72.
- 2 Cora Diamond, 'Wittgenstein on Religious Belief: The Gulfs Between Us', in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 99–137, here 99.
- 3 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 53.
- 4 'In a religious discourse we use such expressions as: 'I believe that so and so will happen,' and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science.' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 57.) — '... 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.' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 59.)
- 5 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.
- 6 "'Well, possibly it may happen and possibly not" ...' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.)— '... one would be reluctant to say: "These people rigorously hold the opinion (view) that there is a Last Judgement". ... It is for this reason that different words are used: "dogma", "faith".' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 57.)— 'You might say (in the normal use): "You only believe—oh well ..." Here it is used entirely differently; ... it is not used as we generally use the word "know".' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 59–60.)
- 7 'We don't talk ... about high probability. Nor about knowing.' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 57.)—'No induction. Terror. That is, as it were, part of the substance of belief. ... a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me ...' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.)—'Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement?' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 58).
- 8 'We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious. ... Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs ...' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 58.)—'... and there can easily be imagined transitions where we wouldn't know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs.' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 58.)— 'A religious belief might in fact fly in the face of such a forecast, and say "No. There it will break down."' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.)
- 9 '... "Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as punishment, so what do you believe?"— I'd say: "I don't have any thoughts of punishment." ... I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures.' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 55.)— 'Take "God created man". Pictures of Michelangelo showing

- the creation of the world. In general, there is nothing which explains the meanings of words as well as a picture ...' (Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 63.)
- 10 See e.g. K. Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism Revisited', in *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Kai Nielsen (London, SCM, 2005), 97–131.
  - 11 Cyril Barrett, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
  - 12 Barrett, *Wittgenstein*, 128.
  - 13 Barrett, *Wittgenstein*, 144.
  - 14 Schönbaumsfeld, *Confusion*, 184.
  - 15 Barrett, *Wittgenstein*, 128.
  - 16 Schönbaumsfeld, *Confusion*, 193.
  - 17 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 53.
  - 18 Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 151.
  - 19 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition* (CD-Rom, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109–196.
  - 20 Wittgenstein, *Nachlass*, 110–144.
  - 21 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume I (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §644.
  - 22 Interesting biographical information can be found in Volker A. Munz, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein and Yorick Smythies: A hitherto Unknown Relationship', in *Wittgenstein und die Zukunft der Philosophie: Eine Neubewertung nach 50 Jahren (Beiträge der Österreichischen Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft Volume IX)* (Kirchberg am Wechsel 2001), 92–97.
  - 23 G. E. M. Anscombe, 'From the Minutes of the Moral Sciences Club, 15. 11. 1945', in *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911–1951*, edited by Brian McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 389.
  - 24 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 67.
  - 25 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 68–69.
  - 26 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 70.
  - 27 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 71–72.
  - 28 Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*; Diamond, 'Gulf'; Schönbaumsfeld, *Confusion*.
  - 29 Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, 154; Diamond, 'Gulf', 118; Schönbaumsfeld, *Confusion*, 177.
  - 30 Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, 156; cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 84.

- 31 Diamond, 'Gulf', 126–128.
- 32 Schönbaumsfeld, *Confusion*, 180.
- 33 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 71.
- 34 Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*. third edition, edited and translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- 35 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932–1935*. From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald, edited by Alice Ambrose (Amherst, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 2001), 32; G. E. Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–1933', in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, edited by J.C. Klagge and A. Nordman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 46–114, here 103.
- 36 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher 1930–1932, 1936–1937*, edited by I. Somavilla (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 90. – English translation of this excerpt by Alfred Nordmann, 'The Sleepy Philosopher: How to Read Wittgenstein's Diaries', in *Wittgenstein: biography and philosophy* edited by J.C. Klagge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 166 f.
- 37 Johannes von Lüpke, 'Theologie als 'Grammatik zur Sprache der heiligen Schrift': Eine Studie zu Luthers Theologieverständnis', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 34, 1992: 227–250.
- 38 Johann Georg Hamann, 'Vermischte Anmerkungen über die Wortfügung in der französischen Sprache', in Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, edited by Josef Nadler, volume 2 (Wien: Herder, 1950), 127–136, here 129; and Johann Georg Herder, *Briefwechsel*, volume 7, edited by Arthur Henkel (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1979), 169.
- 39 Johann Georg Hamann, 'Gedanken über meinen Lebenslauf', in Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, volume 2, 9–54, here 43.
- 40 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 53.
- 41 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 59.
- 42 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 57.
- 43 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 59.
- 44 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.
- 45 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 53.
- 46 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 53.
- 47 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 55.
- 48 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 56.
- 49 Bernard Williams, 'The Truth in Relativism', in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132–143.

- 50 Williams, 'Relativism', 141.  
 51 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 61.  
 52 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 71.  
 53 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures', 72.  
 54 Nielsen, 'Fideism Revisited', p. 103.  
 55 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Letter to Smythies, April 7th, 1944', in *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, 363.

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