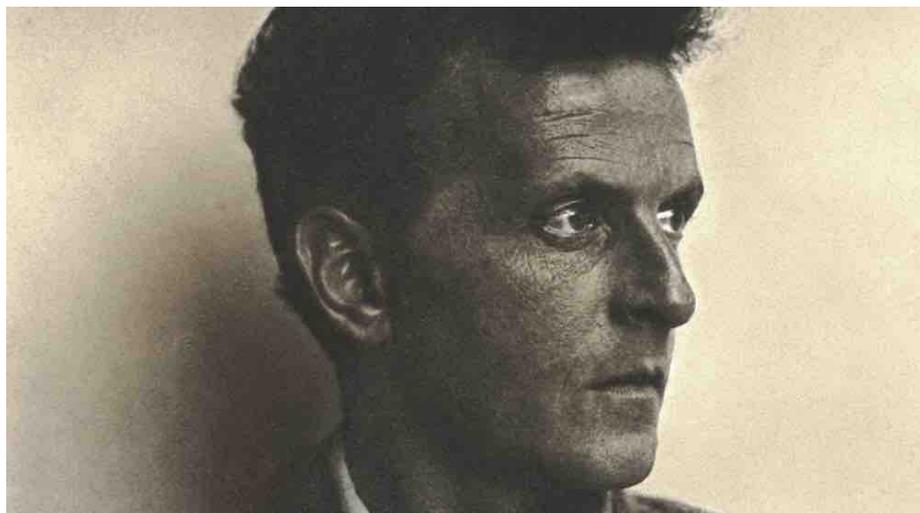


# Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Nature of Religion



Ludwig Wittgenstein once believed that language's function was to name objects and the meaning of language was found in the objects for which it stands. He later rejected this and centred on how language works and is used, believing that problems of religious language come from misunderstanding its usage. Wittgenstein was no longer concerned with the [truth](#) or falsity of language but the way it is used and the functions that it performs, as he said 'Don't ask for the meaning ask for the use.'

Wittgenstein recognised that language is equivocal as words have many different meanings, such as the word 'pen' whose meaning changes in different contexts.

He saw language as a [game](#), which like...*show more content...*

The term 'language games' implies that it is part of an activity. He argued that its usage and meaning is dependent upon its function and society uses language in a specific and agreed way. Wittgenstein called these rules 'grammar', for example, to say that 'God has big feet' is not playing to the rules of the game because a convention says it is inappropriate to God.

Wittgenstein said that 'philosophy may in no way interfere with the usage of language only describe it'. However, to change the description of a language game can have dramatic effects. D.Z. Phillips used the example of 'God is love', which he argued was not a description but a rule for how the word 'God' is to be used. Statements about religious belief are actually descriptions of the grammar of the religious game.

This implies that something cannot be both a rule of grammar and at the same time a description of reality. This approach leaves the religious language game forever defining its own rules. The question is then prompted that if religious language does not get beyond itself to explore reality, how did it get started at all.

The fundamental reason that I myself stick to the idea that there are right and wrong moral judgments and better and worse moral outlooks, and also right and wrong evaluative judgments and better and worse normative outlooks in areas other than morality, is not a metaphysical one. The reason is simply that that is the way that we—and I include myself in this "we"—talk and think, and also the way that we are going to go on talking and thinking.

Hume confessed that he left his scepticism about the material world behind as soon as he left his study; and I observe that no matter how sceptical or how relativistic philosophers may be in their conversation, they leave their scepticism or their relativism behind the minute they engage in serious discussion about almost any subject other than philosophy. If the project of describing "the absolute conception of the world", the project of describing "the things in themselves", the project of dividing our common world into what is "really there" and what is "only a projection", has collapsed, then that seems to be all the more reason to take our lives and our practice seriously in philosophical discussion. A quite different standard of philosophical correctness has been proposed by the influential philosopher David Lewis. Lewis believes that what we should do in philosophy is work out the consequences of alternative metaphysical positions with great care, and not only of our own metaphysical positions, but also the consequences of all the alternative metaphysical positions that have been proposed by others or that we can think of ourselves. He believes that when the consequences of the various metaphysical positions are worked out in

sufficient detail, then our intuitions will tell us which consequences are the least counterintuitive; and the position that we should accept is the one which is, on balance, most free of strongly counterintuitive consequences. Lewis himself employs the method I have described with great care and with great brilliance. Yet it is striking that the positions that he himself defends are almost universally rejected by analytic philosophers, and rejected precisely on the ground that they are counterintuitive. For example, Lewis believes in the real existence of all possible worlds, that is, he believes that there is a real world, just as real as our own, in which the American Revolution failed and America is still a British colony; a real world in which Ghengis Khan established a lasting empire; and so on. The method Lewis recommends was the method of philosophers in the Middle Ages, and very few philosophers after the Middle Ages have been satisfied that this is a method by which one can settle any questions whatsoever. Indeed, Peirce regarded this method—the method of What is Agreeable to Reason, as he called it—as precisely the method that had to be overcome for modern scientific thinking to be born. Lewis, to be sure, describes this method in a way which sounds very anti-foundationalist: "One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of existing opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system. A metaphysician's analysis of mind is an attempt at systematizing our opinions about mind. It succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophic opinions to which we are firmly attached."<sup>1</sup> This passage, considered out of context, would lead one to expect that Lewis is an ordinary conceptual analyst and not the throwback to the Middle Ages I just accused him of being; but the context in which it occurs is precisely the chapter defending the doctrine of the real existence of other possible worlds that I alluded to. Although Lewis does defend this metaphysical idea as though he were simply accounting for our "opinions", it is clear that much more is involved than that. Lewis begins by pointing out that we do say things like "there are countless other ways that things could have been". Then he asks: But what does this mean? Ordinary language permits the paraphrase: there are many ways things could have been besides the way they actually are. On the face of it, this sentence is an existential quantification. It says that there exist many entities of a certain description, to wit "ways the world could have been". I believe that things could have been different in countless ways; I believe permissible paraphrases of what I believe; taking the paraphrase at face value, I therefore believe in the existence of entities that might be called "ways things could have been". I call them "possible worlds". I do not make it an inviolable principle to take seeming existential quantifications in ordinary language at their face value. But I do recognize a presumption in favor of taking sentences at their face value, unless (1) taking them at face value is known to lead to trouble, and (2) taking them some other way is known not to. In this case neither condition is met. I do not know any successful argument that my realism about possible worlds leads to trouble, unless you beg the question by saying that it already is trouble ... All the alternatives I know, on the other hand, do lead to trouble. (Counterfactuals, p. 85) The trouble with this argument is that even if one is a realist about "ways the world could have been" (whatever being a "realist" means), one doesn't have to think of a "way" the world could have been as another world. And that is how Lewis thinks of it: if someone asks him what a possible world is, his reply is "I can only ask him to admit that he knows what sort of thing our actual world is, and then explain that other worlds are more things of that sort, differing not in kind but only in what goes on in them. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit" (p. 85). I once (trying, clumsily, to play his own game) asked him why one couldn't say that a "way" the world could be is just a property, a characteristic, however complicated, that the whole world could have had, rather than another world of the same sort as our own. Lewis's reply wasn't to cite more things that we ordinarily say, and offer paraphrases of them, in the "analytic" style of the paragraph I just quoted. Rather, he argued that if a "way the world could have been" were a property (a "state description" of the entire world), and in a world with one such property (call it P) the Eiffel Tower would have been exactly five hundred feet tall instead of its actual height, then the property "is a world in which the Eiffel tower is five hundred feet tall"—call it Q—must be entailed by the property P. But how can this be? Lewis asked. If properties are simples, then to say that one property P entails another property Q is to assert some kind of a necessary relation between distinct simples, and Lewis found this "unintelligible". So one would have to think of properties as themselves complexes: but Lewis didn't see how properties could be complexes, for what would they be complexes of? In spite of Peirce's attacks on the method of What is Agreeable to Reason, I might be willing to listen to this sort of argument if I had the slightest idea of what these intuitions of Lewis's are supposed to be, or why we should trust their deliverances (calling them "opinions" is hardly an answer), or what the significance is of the fact that something appears "intuitive" and something else appears "unintelligible". Of course, if our intuitions are ways of thinking that have real weight in our lives, whether that weight be practical or spiritual, then I can see why we should regard them as important. But the intuitions to which David Lewis himself gives weight—for example, the intuition that if properties are simples, then it is unintelligible how one property can "entail" another property—seem to me very far from having either practical or spiritual significance. Indeed, far from sharing these intuitions, I feel that I don't even understand what they mean. A very different objection to the idea of taking our lives and our practice seriously in philosophical discussion comes from radical and/or deconstructionist philosophers. These philosophers sometimes regard any talk of preserving ways in which we speak and think and are going to go on

speaking and thinking as inherently reactionary. Isn't it precisely the ways that we speak and think—and according to bourgeois philosophy are going to go on speaking and thinking—that have to be overthrown? If the point of this objection is that we have to overthrow any and every notion of reasonableness or warrant or truth, then I have already discussed this idea at the end of the previous chapter. Let me assume instead a radical critic whom I can take seriously; one who perceives correctly that there are many things that are cruel and unjust about present ways of thinking and talking, and who fears that the maxim that I suggested—that we should give weight in philosophy to the ways we think and talk and are going to go on thinking and talking—may be inherently conservative. This critic points to the danger that the prediction that we are going to go on thinking and talking in a certain way may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. My answer is that the danger is real, but that does not mean that we are doomed to choose between conservatism and an impossible disengagement from our own culture. Ways of thinking and talking that have weight in our lives are connected with and help to constitute ways of living, and certainly the function of philosophers is not simply to endorse existing ways of living; but neither is it to play sceptical games. Refusal to acknowledge our common world does not build a better world. Philosophers have often been the ones to propose new ways of thinking and talking and living; one thinks, for example, of the philosophers who taught us to speak of "the rights of man". But talk of "the rights of man" was itself ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be taken, and was taken, as the slogan of a revolutionary and Utopian politics, a politics that has again and again drenched the earth with blood. On the other hand, "the rights of man" could be taken, and have been taken, as what Kant called regulative ideas, ideals to strive for, and, as Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls have reminded us, to strive to reconcile with one another. The recognition that there are some good things that we want to preserve in present institutions is not incompatible with the recognition that there is much that is intolerable. As Rorty himself has reminded us, the better can be but need not become the enemy of the best. These remarks may seem irrelevant to the sort of thing that analytical philosophers do. After all, one can think and talk the way we ordinarily think and talk and also believe reference is fixed by evolution, or that reference is fixed by "causal attachment to the world", or that it is fixed metaphysically in the way that David Lewis has urged.<sup>2</sup> Some analytic philosophers, to be sure, are guilty of challenging the ways we think and talk without proposing any really workable better ways<sup>3</sup> of thinking and talking; but most analytic philosopher nowadays consider themselves to be providing something like (or at least "continuous with") a scientific explanation of the success of ordinary ways of thinking and talking. It is this analogy—the analogy of the work of philosophers like Jerry Fodor, or the proponents of "evolutionary" intentionality, or the metaphysicians of "possible worlds" to the work of the scientist—that I find fundamentally frivolous. I am not going to argue this here, but in the case of Fodor and the proponents of evolutionary intentionality the discussion in the previous chapters should suffice to convince anyone who knows what a scientific theory, like the theory of evolution, has really accomplished that there is no analogy at all between a serious scientific theory and a typical construction in "analytic metaphysics". Most constructions in analytic metaphysics do not extend the range of scientific knowledge, not even speculatively. They merely attempt to rationalize the ways we think and talk in the light of a scientific ideology. But I am growing tired of criticizing the errors of contemporary philosophers, analytic and non-analytic alike. In the rest of this book I want to try to sketch a better way in philosophy. I shall not do that by issuing a blueprint for a new philosophy, or even a manifesto. At the best, blueprints and manifestos always involve a good deal of fantasy, and we have seen enough fantasy in recent philosophy—both the fantasy of being scientific and the fantasy of putting an end to the claims of truth and reason. The only way I know of pointing to a better way in philosophy is to engage in a certain kind of reading, a reading of the work of some philosophers who, in spite of their mistakes and their flaws—and what philosopher does not make mistakes and have flaws?—point the way toward and exemplify the possibility of philosophical reflection on our lives and language that is neither frivolously sceptical nor absurdly metaphysical, neither fantastic parascience nor fantastic parapolitics, but serious and fundamentally honest reflection of the most difficult kind. I shall begin by discussing Wittgenstein's three Lectures on Religious Belief.<sup>4</sup> We do not have the full text of these lectures; what we have are notes taken by one of the people who was present. But these notes are a valuable source nonetheless. For one thing, in these lectures Wittgenstein's students sometimes make objections or make suggestions as to what Wittgenstein should say; and Wittgenstein's refusal to accept what his students thought he should say tells us a great deal about Wittgenstein's philosophy, and about the ways in which even the best of his students were tempted to misinterpret it.

Wittgenstein imagines someone asking him if he believes in a Last Judgment, and on the first page of the published notes Wittgenstein says, "Suppose I say that the body will rot, and another says 'No. Particles will rejoin in a thousand years, and there will be a Resurrection of you.'" Wittgenstein's comment is "If some said: 'Wittgenstein, do you believe in this?' I'd say: 'No.' 'Do you contradict the man?' I'd say: 'No' ... Would you say: 'I believe the opposite,' or 'There is no reason to suppose such a thing'? I'd say neither."<sup>6</sup> In short—and perhaps this is the only thing that is absolutely clear about these lectures—Wittgenstein believes that the religious man and the atheist talk past one another.

Wittgenstein distinguishes religious beliefs partly by what he calls their unshakeability. Speaking again of the man who believes in a Last Judgment, Wittgenstein says: "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 *[sic]* all his life. This is a very much stronger fact—foregoing pleasures, always appealing to this picture. This in one sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs, because the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on things which are by far better established for him. Although he distinguishes between things well-established and not well-established".<sup>8</sup>

In understanding these remarks I think it is important to know that although Wittgenstein presents himself in these lectures as a non-believer, we know from the other posthumous writings published as *Culture and Value* that Wittgenstein had a deep respect for religious belief, that he thought a great deal about religious belief, especially about Christianity, and that in particular he paid a great deal of attention to the writings of Kierkegaard, and especially to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The man who has an unshakeable belief in the Last Judgment and lets it regulate for all his life, although he is very willing to admit that the Last Judgment is not an established fact, sounds like a Christian after Kierkegaard's own heart.<sup>9</sup> Yet Kierkegaard himself wrote that faith "has in every moment the infinite dialectic of uncertainty present with it".<sup>10</sup> It would be ludicrous to suppose that inner struggles with the issue of religious belief are something that Wittgenstein did not know. When he takes the unshakeableness of a religious belief as one of its characteristics, he does not mean that a genuine religious belief is always and at every moment free from doubt. Kierkegaard spoke of faith as a state to be repeatedly reentered, and not as a state in which one can permanently stay. But I think that Kierkegaard would agree with Wittgenstein—and that Wittgenstein is here agreeing with Kierkegaard—that religious belief "regulates for all" in the believer's life, even though his religious belief may alternate with doubt. In this respect it is different from an empirical belief. If I confidently believe that a certain way is the right way to build a bridge, then I will set out building the bridge that way. If I come to have doubts, I will not go on building the bridge in that way (unless I am a crooked contractor); I will halt the construction and run further tests and make calculations.

Wittgenstein uses the following example:

Suppose you had two people, and one of them, when he had to decide which course to take, thought of retribution and the other did not. One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment, and another person doesn't think of this at all.

If he is ill, he may think: "What have I done to deserve this?" This is one way of thinking of retribution. Another way is, he thinks in a general way whenever he is ashamed of himself: "This will be punished."

Take two people, one of whom talks of his behaviour and of what happens to him in terms of retribution, the other one does not. These people think entirely differently. Yet, so far, you can't say they believe different things.

[Wittgenstein adds] It is this way: if someone said: "Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as a punishment, so what do you believe?"—I'd say: I don't have any thoughts of punishment.

There are, for instance, these entirely different ways of thinking first of all—which needn't be expressed by one person saying one thing, another person another thing.<sup>11</sup>

The example doesn't depend on whether he is or isn't. What Wittgenstein means to bring out by the example is that one's life may be organized by very different pictures. And he means to suggest that religion has more to do with the kind of picture that one allows to organize one's life than it does with expressions of belief. As Wittgenstein says, summing up this example, "What we call believing in a judgement Day or not believing in a judgement Day—The expression of belief may play an absolutely minor role".<sup>12</sup>

Wittgenstein also contrasts the basis upon which one forms empirical beliefs and the basis upon which one forms religious beliefs. "Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons" in the religious case. "They are, in a way, quite inconclusive". He contrasts two cases: a person who believes that something that fits the description of the Last Judgment will in fact happen, years and years in the future, and who believes this on the basis of what we would call scientific evidence, and a person who has a religious belief which "might in fact fly in the face of such a forecast and say 'No. There it will break down.'" Wittgenstein says that if a scientist told him that there would be a Last Judgment in a thousand years, and that he had to forgo all pleasures because of such a forecast, that he, Wittgenstein, "wouldn't budge". But the person whose belief in a such a forecast was religious and not scientific "would fight for his life not to be dragged into the fire. No induction. Terror. That is, as it were, part of the substance of the belief."<sup>13</sup>

At this point, a number of possible interpretations of what Wittgenstein is saying might occur to one. (1) I already mentioned the Kuhnian idea of incommensurability. Perhaps Wittgenstein thinks that religious language and ordinary empirical language are incommensurable forms of discourse. The non-religious person simply can't understand the religious person. (2) The religious person and the non-religious person can understand one another, but the non-religious person is using language literally and the religious person is using it in some non-literal way,

perhaps emotively, or to "express an attitude". (3) Ordinary discourse is "cognitive" and the religious person is making some kind of "non-cognitive" use of language. What I shall try to show in the light of these lectures, and especially the third and concluding lecture, is that Wittgenstein regards the first as a useless thing to say, and the second and third as simply wrong.

This will, of course, not solve the interpretative problem, but it will in a sense sharpen it, and make it interesting. If Wittgenstein is not saying one of the standard things about religious language—for example, that it expresses false pre-scientific theories, or that it is non-cognitive, or that it is emotive, or that it is incommensurable—then what is he saying and how is it possible for him to avoid all of these standard alternatives? Still more important, how does he think we, including those of us who are not religious (and I don't think Wittgenstein himself ever succeeded in recovering the Christian faith in which he was raised, although it was always a possibility for him that he might), are to think about religious language? What sort of a model is Wittgenstein offering us for reflection on what is always a very important, very difficult, and sometimes very divisive part of human life?

What then is Wittgenstein saying? I believe that what Wittgenstein (in company with Kierkegaard) is saying is this: that religious discourse can be understood in any depth only by understanding the form of life to which it belongs.<sup>25</sup> What characterizes that form of life is not the expressions of belief that accompany it, but a way—a way that includes words and pictures, but is far from consisting in just words and pictures—of living one's life, of regulating all of one's decisions. Here the believer, Kierkegaard, would add something that Wittgenstein does not say, but that I think he would agree with: namely, that a person may think and say all the right words and be living a thoroughly non-religious life. Indeed, Kierkegaard insists that a person may think he or she is worshipping God and really be worshipping an idol. (I suspect that this is one of the reasons that Kierkegaard is so much hated by fundamentalists. For Kierkegaard an authentically religious form of life is characterized by a constant concern that one not replace the idea of God with a narcissistic creation of one's own; and this concern expresses itself in uncertainty as much as in certainty. For Kierkegaard, to be absolutely sure you are "born again" is a sign that you are lost.) What Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have in common is the idea that understanding the words of a religious person properly—whether you want to speak of understanding their "meaning" or not—is inseparable from understanding a religious form of life, and this is not a matter of "semantic theory", but a matter of understanding a human being.<sup>26</sup>

## The Religious Person "Uses a Picture"

Still, Wittgenstein himself does say that the religious person "uses a picture". Is this not a way of saying that religious language is non-cognitive? Indeed, Yvor Smythies seems to share this worry, since he objects toward the very end of the third lecture, "This isn't all he does—associate a use with a picture." Wittgenstein's initial reply is, "Rubbish"—hardly an encouraging response. Wittgenstein goes on to explain that when he says the religious man is using a picture, he does not mean by that anything that the religious person himself would not say:

*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?

"He could just as well have said so and so"—this [remark] is foreshadowed by the word "attitude". He couldn't just as well have said something else.

If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions.

Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use?

Of certain pictures we say that they might just as well be replaced by another—e.g. we could, under certain circumstances, have one projection of an ellipse drawn instead of another.

[He *may* say]: "I would have been prepared to use another picture, it would have had the same effect...."

The whole *weight* may be in the picture ...

When I say he's using a picture, I'm merely making a *grammatical* remark: [What I say] can only be verified by the consequences he does or does not draw.

If Smythies disagrees, I don't take notice of this disagreement.

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>27</sup>

"All I wished to characterize was the conventions [consequences] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant." One of the most impressive remarks a great philosopher has ever made in a discussion! Wittgenstein is saying here that to say the religious person is using a picture is simply to describe what we can in fact observe: that religious people do employ pictures, and that they draw certain consequences from them, but not the same consequences that we draw when we use similar pictures in other

contexts. If I speak of my friend as having an eye, then normally I am prepared to say that he has an eyebrow, but when I speak of the Eye of God being upon me, I am not prepared to speak of the eyebrow of God. But the impressive thing here is not what Wittgenstein says, but the limit he places on his own observation. Pictures are important in life. The whole weight of a form of life may lie in the pictures that that form of life uses. In his own notes, some of which are republished in the collection *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein says \"It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition, but it is equally true that 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 our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition\".