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On my honor I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis.

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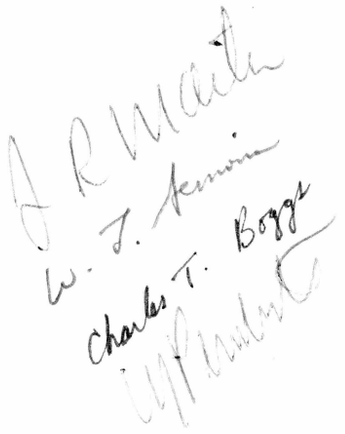
Wittgenstein on the Groundlessness of our Fundamental Empirical and Religious Beliefs



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Introduction

This paper first examines Wittgenstein's treatment in *On Certainty* of the groundlessness of our fundamental beliefs. It then examines some 'groundless' aspects of religious (specifically Christian) beliefs, looking for similarities with fundamental empirical beliefs. Finally, this paper reflects on some essential differences between fundamental empirical beliefs and religious beliefs based on the life-changes that religious belief entails, again drawing from Wittgenstein.

Chapter One

In his collected notes entitled *On Certainty*,[1] Wittgenstein considers G.E. Moore's response to the sceptic who claims to doubt even the most obvious of truths about the external world. In his articles "Proof of an External World" and "A Defense of Common Sense,"[2] Moore comes to the defense of certain propositions which, he claims, he knows are true. In the former article Moore claims that he *knows* that he has two hands, and he points to each one for emphasis. Moore thinks that his confident knowledge of the existence of such objects as hands, paper, and socks is adequate substantiation with which to counter the skeptic's doubts and conclude that the external world indeed *does* exist. In the second article he expands the list of truisms to include such sentences as "I have a body," "I have never been far from the surface of the earth," and "The earth has existed for many years past". Moore claims that anyone with common sense knows these things, hence the skeptic's doubts are misplaced.

Moore's claims to knowledge possess the peculiarity that the grounds he gives for his knowledge claims reside in the same level of certainty as his alleged knowledge itself. He claims to know that he has two hands, and by pointing to his own hands he gives us a kind of evidence for the truth of his claim. But if Moore is going to entertain seriously the skeptic's doubt of the existence of the external world

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright and trans. by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

[2] Both articles appear in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

(including Moore's hands), then how does he know that *those* are hands? If he wasn't sure that he had two hands before he pointed, how is any pointing going to help? Indeed, Moore claims to be unsure if he has hands, yet he can still *identify* his hands correctly. Wittgenstein expresses the point:

> One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.
>
> But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. [*OC*, §243]

The grounds that Moore gives for his knowledge of the existence of his hands fail to secure that knowledge. "I know that I have hands" cannot be substantiated by pointing to my hands because the grounds of my appeal are no firmer than the original proposition itself. (If I don't *already* know that I have two hands, how am I going to recognize *these* as hands?) The picture we envision in Moore's approach is that of someone who knows what he is looking for (namely, a pair of hands) and then is surprised to find them attached to himself! This person already knows what a hand is and hence successfully identifies the funny-shaped things at the end of his arms. But what is in question is not whether Moore has ever seen *these* before; it is whether *these* are hands. Where did Moore's knowledge of what a hand is come from? It certainly didn't come from any testing or investigation. Rather, one learns how to identify hands correctly by learning the meaning of the word "hand". ("*This* is a hand.") While growing up one learns the meaning of this word and

many others as well as the broad range of skills that contribute to the mastery of a language.

"I know that I have two hands" makes perfect sense in a situation in which one is uncertain of this physiological fact. If I'm in a bad accident and one of my hands may have been cut off, then I may look down and assure myself or someone else that --yes!-- I *do* still have two hands. But this is not the circumstance of Moore's statement. In perfectly ordinary circumstances Moore is *considering* the possibility of doubt, and he therefore admits the possibility that convincing evidence will overrule that doubt. But in this case, and in the case of all of the fundamental propositions which Moore considers, doubt simply isn't in the picture. If someone claimed to doubt whether he or she had two hands, we would be bewildered and would perhaps wonder if this person knows the meaning of the word "hand". "What do you mean? If *those* aren't hands, what are?!" And not only does Moore overlook his long-standing knowledge of the word "hand", but by considering these propositions as defensible by the giving of evidence, he admits the possibility of selectively doubting certain fundamental propositions without recognizing the intricate connections that those propositions have with others equally fundamental to our entire way of thinking and acting. Wittgenstein raises these questions:

> If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (Who decides *what* stands fast?) [*OC*, §125]

If the existence of one's own hands is going to be called into question, why not the reliability of one's visual impressions as well? The above remark by Wittgenstein gives us a glimpse of the fact that doubts (as well as knowledge claims) have *grounds*. The grounds of a doubt include not only the reasons compelling us to call something into question but the surrounding foundation of propositions and actions that are *not* called into question and therefore sustain the doubt itself. Wittgenstein points out that checking the existence of the hands by means of the eyes reveals a selective decision of what "stands fast". While Moore defends his knowledge of the existence of the external world by demonstrating the existence of his hands, his demonstration rests on the use of his eyes as well as his unexplained mastery of the English language. Clearly this back-and-forth doubting and pointing by the skeptic and Moore infelicitously stabs at the fundamental ground of actions and beliefs that underlie even the skeptic's doubts and Moore's defense.

Since both parties consider these propositions to be subject to doubt and verification, Moore and the skeptic lie on the same plane, yet their trouble lies not with any lack of talent on either side, but with the entire plain on which they spar. While certain fundamental propositions are called into question, their deeper solidity (and that of others as well) is completely overlooked. The propositions that Moore has in mind simply don't allow themselves to be tested. (And it's not that our tests aren't *good* enough. No test that we can employ will advance these propositions to a higher degree of certainty than they *already* possess.) The certainty of these propositions lies not in the realm of defensible knowledge at all, but much deeper in the form of

fundamental *beliefs*. The resistance that Moore feels toward the skeptic, while poorly played-out, is at bottom well-founded. The thought of someone doubting these strikingly obvious propositions inspires us to want to defend them, to say that (by gum!) we *know* them, but in defending them we have only created more problems by ignoring their real logical status as fundamental beliefs. What we all perceive about these truisms is not a knowledge that has been justified, but their ungrounded steadfastness in our language-game. Their position in our system of propositions is even more remarkable than Moore imagines, for, as Wittgenstein argues, they stand fast even *without* testing [*OC*, §138]. The certainty of these expressions is the basic logical role that they play in our whole way of thinking. Wittgenstein again:

> When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions.
> [*OC*, §136]

The unquestionable certainty of these propositions rests not on knowledge, which entails the overruling of doubt by conclusive evidence, but on their being "*isolated* from doubt" [*OC*, §87]. These expressions are isolated in the way that we learn and use language in conjunction with our many human activities . We do not consciously choose these propositions from a long list of selections and agree with one another not to doubt them, but rather their logical role is such that they are simply *immune* to doubt. A comparison with a hypothetical proposition will help elucidate this logical difference.

Consider these two propositions taken from section 52 of *On Certainty*:

1) At this distance from the sun there is a planet.
2) Here is a hand.

The first proposition is hypothetical: its truth depends on the quality of the evidence given to support it; the second is not based on evidence of any kind. No tests were made to establish that *this* is a hand, and none will make that fact any more certain than it already is. While we can imagine this sentence being used in the teaching of the meaning of the word "hand," it is isolated from doubt and therefore non-hypothetical. It is this non-hypothetical class of propositions which lies at the bottom of our language game. But, Wittgenstein stresses, while the boundary between hypothetical propositions and non-hypothetical ones is not sharp [cf. *OC*, §§318, 319], it is not that in moving from hypothetical propositions to non-hypothetical ones doubt becomes less and less *probable*. The fact is that "doubt gradually *loses* its sense" [*OC*, §56, italics mine] altogether. Doubting what lies at the ground of our thinking and acting just *isn't* possible without casting out the very ground on which the doubt itself stands. Wittgenstein:

> What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist. [*OC*, §247]

An attempt to doubt (or to affirm by testing) that which lies at the bottom of our thinking and acting is like an attempt to measure our

standards of measurement as well as the measur*ing* itself. Again, Wittgenstein:

> The reason why the use of the expression "true or false" has something misleading about it is that it is like saying "it tallies with the facts or it doesn't", and the very thing that is in question is what "tallying" is here.
>
> [*OC*, §199]

Within our system of beliefs we are able to approach hypothetical propositions with either doubts or justification, but the ground of those beliefs, standing as the very basis of our judgement, is not subject to either doubt or justification. If that on the basis of which we are able to judge a proposition 'true' or 'false' (i.e. judge for or against a proposition) is approached as subject to the same questioning, then what are we to take as the standard of measure? What, then, would 'true' or false' be anymore?! [*OC*, §514, cf. also §205] "To be sure," Wittgenstein asserts, "there is justification; but justification comes to an end" [*OC*, §192]. This realization is contrary to our allegedly 'rational' nature. From time to time, in fact, it seems that the philosopher's vice is that he or she claims every proposition as the object of his or her doubt or verification, regardless of a proposition's actual role in our use of language.

Wittgenstein's thought on this subject of fundamental propositions provides us with the strange assertion that while justification does some to an end somewhere, it comes to an end not with a set of propositions that strike us as true. Rather, justification comes to an end in *action*.

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;---but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.
> [*OC*, §204]

Our actions reveal what we hold at bottom as certain. While we do indeed possess definite, fundamental beliefs, these are not always made explicit, let alone realized. When we imagine a laboratory scientist conducting experiments with cell samples from different organisms, we imagine him using all sorts of scientific equipment. As he uses the microscope to test a hypothesis about the internal make-up of a certain cell, are we to imagine him saying to himself "Now I *know* that this microscope works, and I *know* that these glasses don't alter the image before it gets to my eye, and I *know* that my memory of this image won't change before I can sketch it in my notebook, and I *know* . . ."? Certainly not. The scientist depends on a great deal of equipment and skills the reliability of which he never questions. When the scientist trustingly uses a microscope in his experiments, do we want to say that he *knows* that it is working properly? Nonsense. He simply uses it, nothing more. And yet he or she *could* test the microscope, but in order to get anywhere with one's research, *something* must be trusted. In fact, a great deal *is* trusted. But at the bottom of all that could be tested lies that which, hard as he or she tries, the scientist could never successfully test for certainty. For example, if the scientist felt a little crazy and decided to conduct experiments in order to test the hypothesis that nature is in fact not uniform, he or she would run up against the limits of this hypothesis, namely that the uniformity of nature is a non-hypothetical foundation

of all successful experimentation. And what is trusted is trusted not by *thinking* "Well, gosh, I suppose I can trust this apparatus"; but it is simply trusted *in deed*. As Wittgenstein remarks in section seven of *On Certainty*,

> My *life* shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on.---I tell a friend e.g. "Take that chair over there", "Shut the door", etc. etc. [italics mine]

If we examine certain aspects of the process of learning, we find that the relationship between doubt and certainty becomes even clearer.

> The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn't so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level. [*OC*, §538]

When a child responds to its parent calling its name, it doesn't follow that the child knows its own name. In order for the child to know what something is called it must learn the language-game of naming, i.e. it must learn what it means to name something. Hence, a good check to see if a child knows what something is called would be to ask it "What is this called?". But, as Wittgenstein points out, "the child who is just learning to speak has not yet got the concept *is called* at all" [*OC*, §536]. As the child gains the mastery of a language, it learns not only names of things, but it also learns what it means *to name* something. When its mother tries to teach it the word "ball" by pointing to a ball and saying "ball", this bodily and verbal gesture will accomplish nothing if the child is impervious to the activity of naming. The child somehow has to learn to interpret the strange bodily gesture

accompanied by a noise coming out of its mother's mouth *as* an act of naming. Not merely the word "ball", but the whole gesture is filled with meaning. Somehow the child learns that what its mother is doing is teaching it the name of something, and its familiarity with the language-game of naming then becomes fundamental to the child's mastery of a language.

Not only does the child learn naming, but it learns to make judgements about the world. It gains its fundamental beliefs not by consciously learning a set of explicit propositions or rules, for first it must learn what rules are and how to apply them --or rather *by* applying them. So along with the judgements themselves comes the non-propositional, acted-out understanding of judg*ing*. When we decide for or against a proposition by considering certain evidence, what lies at bottom is not only a set of fundamental propositions and rules about what counts for evidence and what doesn't, but a *practice* of evidence-taking. Before learning an investigative strategy or procedure of experimentation, the scientist must first be acquainted with what it means to investigate something at all --what it means to hypothesize, to invent a test of the hypothesis, to conduct the test, to collect data, to interpret and assimilate the data, etc., and ultimately it is these learned skills and understanding, or world-picture, which underlie his or her investigations. Wittgenstein writes of Lavoisier,

> He has got hold of a definite world-picture -- not of course one that he invented: he learned it as a child. I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned. [*OC*, §167]

The end of testing for an empirical proposition is not a fundamental proposition, but "an ungrounded way of acting" [*OC*, §110]. Again:

> the end isn't' certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom our the language-game.
> [*OC*, §204]

And as it learns judgements through judging, the child awakens to a whole system of beliefs. Through this learning process of judgement-making, the child's world-picture of fundamental beliefs dawns not one proposition or rule at a time, but an entire system comes into view. "(Light gradually dawns over the whole)" [*OC*, §141]. As judgements are learned, so too are the connections between judgements learned. This "totality of judgements" [*OC*, §140] sustains each individual judgement itself as the medium in which all judgements exist. All thoughts and judgements must have their sense *within* our system of beliefs. Even demands for the 'objective' truth of an empirical proposition must be met with the same response: "We'll just have to decide with what we've got. Don't ask me to decide according to another set of rules and beliefs than my own. I don't know what that kind of decision would be like." We must consider a proposition's relation to the other beliefs that we already possess: "Can this possibly *fit* with what we've got?" If someone wanted to know if anybody has ever been to the planet Pluto, we would say 'no', that no reasonable person has been known to report this, and that, so far as we know, our current degree of advancement in space-flight technology can't sustain such a trip. In order to decide in favor of the

proposition that someone has been to Pluto, a whole host of other things would have to be reconciled. How did this person get there? What advancements in technology made this trip possible? Why haven't we heard about this? Indeed, the consideration of one proposition often involves very direct, foreseeable consequences with closely related other propositions that contribute to our system of beliefs. These consequences show the intimate connection and interdependence that our system of beliefs possesses. Wittgenstein remarks,

> Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. *What stands fast does so not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.* [*OC*, §144, italics mine]

As children learn to judge they learn many facts, and they take them, at *first*, on trust. American children, for instance, learn that George Washington was the first president of the United States and that Austin is the capital of Texas. They take these things as true without doubting them. (Doubting comes later.) Gradually their world-picture gets filled-out based on the authority of their teachers, the adults. At a later stage this world-picture becomes the ground on which we make our own investigations and judgements, but the act of investigating --of questioning and answering-- rests on the child's learned acquaintance with judging-skills as well as on the beliefs themselves. When a child intuitively calls something into question, it is not merely the manifold of propositions that it already has in contrast

to some new, conflicting data that causes it to question the new data, but it is the child's own judging-sense which judges when to question and when not to question. This human sense, this investigative way of acting, is learned, and it lies alongside rules and propositions at the bottom of our language-game.

While our investigative behavior takes place within a system, the system itself is not arbitrary, nor is it merely a propositional set of presuppositions. "The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life" [*OC*, §105]. Wittgenstein likens this system to a kind of mythology, comparing the role of the fundamental propositions to the rules of a game. Of the "countless empirical propositions that count as certain for us" [*OC*, §273], i.e. of those untestable, solid expressions which we cannot give up without casting out our whole system of judgements itself, it may be said that they have the character of rules. Yet although they act like rules, they are rarely thought of as such. The game can, in fact, be played without ever explicating these rules, for they are expressions of our deeply-rooted ways of thinking and acting that underlie all our use of language, including the skill of *applying* a rule. And perhaps even this idea of a rule itself runs aground eventually. (Do we want to say that we have rules for the application of rules? -- and so on, and so on. . . .) We can also imagine that certain empirical propositions or rules are hardened and serve as channels through which more fluid propositions flow, and that this relation can even change with time as parts of the solid foundation become fluid and some of the fluid propositions become solid channels. A good example of this kind of change in the epistemological status of our

beliefs could be Wittgenstein's own case from section 108 of *On Certainty*. He imagines a person asking if it is objectively true or false that someone has been on the moon.

> Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered.

Wittgenstein's remark has its home in 1950, and at that time these questions were indeed not answered (at least as far as Wittgenstein knew). The proposition that someone has been to the moon conflicts with the system of beliefs that Wittgenstein (and most reasonable people at the time) held. Yet we know that someone has been to the moon. If a child asks us if someone has been up there, we will answer "yes" and maybe even explain that the astronauts flew in a rocket and wore suits that contained the atmosphere needed to sustain them on the visit. In this case, the hardened channels through which more fluid propositions flow have themselves become subject to change; as new experiments were conducted and new discoveries made, our solid beliefs about the limits of space travel changed and became fluid while others became solid.

The metaphor that Wittgenstein uses in sections 97 and 99 of *On Certainty* is that of a river. The entire river represents the movement of our thoughts and lives, and the river-bed stands for those propositions which hold fast, not by any evidence (hence we don't *know* them), but by the course of the river itself. While change is

possible from solidity to fluidity and back, the two remain distinguishable from one another. And there is a third element in the picture as well: bedrock. This represents the deepest of propositions and rules; they will never change, or, if so, only imperceptibly. The whole river is a living experience; it is the way we live. No part of it stands without the rest. In this sense we may say that the entire system, bedrock, river-bed, and water, is a characterization of our total experience. Wittgenstein writes,

> One wants to say "*All* my experiences shew that it is so". But how do they do that? For that proposition to which they point itself belongs to a particular interpretation of them.
> "That I regard this proposition as certainly true also characterizes my interpretation of experience."
> [*OC*, §145]

To say of a system that it always judges correctly according to its own ground is to say nothing more than that a system judges *as* it judges. The river "justifies" itself, or better, the river just *is* the river. There is no further appeal: the bedrock *is* the deepest ground of appeal, and it announces itself through our ways of living, our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; it is the basis on which everything else is judged and the medium of judgement itself. After considerable writing on this topic, Wittgenstein reluctantly resorts to a phrase from the *Philosophical Investigations*:[3] He conceives of the steadfast 'certainty' of this system as a "form of life" and explains further that he wants to regard it as "something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal" [§§358,359]. The

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[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1968).

certainty which Moore infelicitiously defends rests on this kind of living system, not one purely of judgements and rules, but one of judg*ing* and apply*ing* rules. This is not knowledge, but a base of fundamental beliefs and believing. Any appeal, allegedly philosophical or otherwise (but *especially* allegedly philosophical), to grounds other than the living arena in which our dynamic uses of language take place leaves itself behind and builds castles in the air. To quote again from the *Philosophical Investigations* [§132], we should "constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook," lest our efforts resemble "an engine idling".

When in the fields of sociology and anthropology there arises the problem of trying to interpret a strange culture's thoughts and actions, error often occurs in the misapplication of our foundational world-picture. Our systems of beliefs are such that groups that are severely isolated from each other may have a hard time understanding certain expressions of the other group. Composed in 1930 or 1931, Wittgenstein's remarks on Frasier's *Golden Bough* , express Wittgenstein's reservations about trying to interpret other peoples' cultures purely in terms of our own. Twenty years later he retains much of the same idea, writing in section 609 of *On Certainty*,

> Supposing we met people who did not regard [an appeal to physics] as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?---It we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?

We would consider their appeal to the oracle as an 'incorrect' judgement of the natural world, but our judgement would be coming from our own world-picture which includes a strong influence from twentieth-century physics. Do we want to say that their appeal is incorrect based on our standards of judgement? In their culture, the consultation of an oracle may be precisely what constitutes a *right* appeal! We may be quick to impute our modern Western way of thinking and acting into their minds and culture, but such an attempt on our part is merely aggressive ignorance. Hence, while we focus on the consultation of an oracle what we are really doing is crashing our underlying world-picture against theirs. (Wittgenstein is not saying that this kind of cultural isolation *completely* isolates one society and its thinking and acting from another's. There may be found a certain common ground on which a mutual understanding can be built.) Hence when two different basic understandings come face to face, reasons may be given in an effort to explain our actions, but since reasons rest on a ground of fundamental beliefs, and since the *grounds* are what differ fundamentally, "at the end of reason comes *persuasion*," i.e. the teaching of one whole way of understanding the world to another. "(Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)" [*OC*, §612]

Chapter Two

From the notes taken from Wittgenstein's 1938 lectures on religious belief[1] and from the volume of collected remarks from his notebooks entitled *Culture and Value*[2] we have a limited but dense body of Wittgenstein's thinking on religious belief. This thought on religious belief bears a striking comparison with his work in the *On Certainty* notes on fundamental empirical beliefs. From these notes we can see that Wittgenstein considers religious beliefs at least partly in the light of our trusting reliance on fundamental empirical propositions and rules. In *On Certainty* he remarks,

> if the shopkeeper wanted to investigate each of his apples without any reason, for the sake of being certain about everything, why doesn't he have to investigate the investigation? And can one talk of belief here (I mean belief as in 'religious belief', not surmise)? [*OC*, §459]

Wittgenstein likens the shopkeeper's ground of fundamental beliefs to religious belief. How, then, are these two different kinds of belief similar? Unlike scientific hypotheses, both fundamental empirical judgements and religious beliefs are non-hypothetical; that is, they are held with certainty regardless of whether or not they have been verified through empirical testing or rational 'proof'. Wittgenstein refers to religious beliefs as "unshakeable beliefs" [*LC*, p.54], and we

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1 These notes are published in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 53-72. Hereafter references will be abbreviated as follows: *LC*, followed by the page number.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright and trans. by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). Hereafter references will be abbreviated: *CV*, followed by the page number.

can point to a few ways in which religious beliefs operate fully in spite of a lack of ordinary evidence.

Christians, for example, base their lives on the narrative story of Jesus Christ's life, ministry, death, and Resurrection from the dead, which has a specific historical setting in time and place; and yet many Christians *never* seek any sort of historical verification for this story.[3] Many Christians have even *died* for this story. They believe in the Final Judgement, and yet they're not interested in any convincing predictions of its arrival (whatever those would be like). In fact, sure as one may be that the story of Jesus of Nazareth really did happen and that there will indeed be a Last Judgement (whatever the alleged evidence), one doesn't necessarily have a *religious* belief, i.e. one is not automatically moved to base his or her life on these claims. Wittgenstein writes,

> It has been said that Christianity rests on an historic basis. It has been said a thousand times by intelligent people that indubitability is not enough in this case. Even if there is as much evidence as for Napoleon. Because the indubitability wouldn't be enough to make me change my whole life.
> [*LC*, p.57]

For the Christian believer, evidence doesn't come into the picture, for no amount of evidence will necessitate the *changes* that Christianity demands. The obstacles that confront the Christian, in fact, rarely arise from a need to have historical evidence for the life of Jesus. Because Christianity is not fundamentally about deciding the

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[3] As an example of a major world religion I will use Christianity since it is the religion most frequently referred to by Wittgenstein and the one with which I am the most familiar.

historical accuracy of the Gospel story but rather about changing one's life based *on* the Gospel story, obstacles to the faith usually arise from a completely different area. Wittgenstein writes:

> Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. *Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives!* Make *a quite different* place in your life for it.
> [*CV*, p.32e]

Of belief in the Last Judgement Wittgenstein adds:

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

If the demand of this predicted Last Judgement is that I must forsake certain things which give me pleasure and follow certain rules of living, the forecast, no matter how convincing it is, won't necessarily heighten my willingness to do these things in an effort to change myself. Something *different* is required here, and it has nothing to do with the kind of certainty with which we hold knowledge claims, that is, a certainty based on evidence of some sort. To consider children again, a child is known occasionally to do something for which it knows good and well that it will be punished.

Another example of this difference between hypothetical empirical propositions and religious beliefs is the creation story from

Genesis. Some remarks --sentences-- in the story have a form resembling a cosmological hypothesis. It describes God making the heavens, the earth, and all life on the earth including the human race. This, we may be inclined to say, is *how* the world was created. We may even be inclined to compare this story with other accounts of how our planet and everything on it came into being. In this case we have taken the Genesis story as an empirical hypotheses to be tested 'true' or 'false'. If in place of this creation story the Bible merely read "God created everything that there is according to His own purpose and means, and He created man as well; therefore live not as if you were your own, but remember at all times that your very lives and the world you live in belong to God", then we would perhaps be less inclined to make this sort of hypothetical application of a religious story. (Now Genesis Chapter One *can* be read as a primitive cosmological theory, but my purpose here is merely to distinguish such a use from its religious one.) As the story stands, if we press this scientific application further, we will soon realize that it lacks some essential parts. For example, if this is a cosmological theory of the beginning of the universe, where did God get the material to make everything if it wasn't already here in space and time? What explains the amazing effect that the sound waves of his voice had on the molecules of the oceans and everything else? What transpired between all the "Let there be"'s and "It was so"'s? What kind of physical interaction took place, and if there was any, does this mean that God is a being in space and time? There are just too many dead-end questions and gaps in the story for it to serve in the slightest degree as a cosmological hypothesis now. But even in the event that we ignore

these gaps, our response would still most likely be (as for any scientific theory) "Wow, great, so *that's* how it's done. Neat." --and we may feel no religious feeling of awe whatsoever. Even if the story were air tight as a cosmological theory, it wouldn't necessarily *move* us at all! --But as a religious story of creation, it is full of life. Wittgenstein wrote in 1950,

> If someone who believes in God looks around and asks "Where does everything I see some from?", "Where does all this come from?", he is *not* craving for a (causal) explanation; and his question gets its point from being the expression of a certain craving. He is, namely, expressing an attitude to all explanations. --But how is this manifested in his life?
>
> The attitude that's in question is that of taking a certain matter seriously and then, beyond a certain point, no longer regarding it as serious, but maintaining that something else is even more important. [*CV*, p.85e]

Taken religiously, the Genesis story conveys God's sovereignty over His creation, His pleasure with His creation, etc. Taken religiously, the story leads away from questions like "What did God make everything out of?" and teaches instead the religious awe that asks "How mighty art Thou?" The hypothetical use treats the story as something to be reckoned with our latest scientific understanding about the physical universe; the non-hypothetical, religious use treats the story with reverence as a sacred text describing something of the relationship between God, man, and the world. Though this religious story comes in the form of a primitive cosmological hypothesis, its religious meaning differs from this hypothetical use entirely. In fact, one can religiously hold fast to this Judeo-Christian account of creation and

simultaneously subscribe to any cosmological hypothesis he of she wants. (They just aren't in conflict!)

While most believers live a life of faith devoid of any justifying evidence for their beliefs, some are tempted to venture in the direction of mixing their religious beliefs with science or attempting to undergird them with proofs of reason. Such confusion regards religious beliefs as something like surmise. If these propositions can be proven, either by convincing evidence or purely by the reason, then, so one thinks, we will have a bona-fide religious belief. But even if we were successful in 'proving' some such proposition, that proposition would no more hold the status (i.e. the role in our lives) of a religious belief than would a proven trigonometric principle. The power just isn't in the proof. As Wittgenstein remarks, "Entirely different *connections* would make them into religious beliefs" [*LC*, p.58, italics mine]. It is the ways in which we use religious propositions that gives them a religious sense, and the fundamental place that these propositions hold in our lives is *not* guaranteed by any proof. A proof convinces one of the truth of a proposition; a religious proposition demands not merely to be affirmed, but (much more importantly) *lived*. To assume religious beliefs is to take hold of these beliefs "believingly (i.e. lovingly)" [*CV*, p.32e].

As is the case with fundamental empirical propositions, it is not the case that all religious beliefs lie together at this basic logical level. Within Christianity itself there are foundational beliefs, the likes of which may be found in the creeds: that God created the heavens and the earth, that He sent His only begotten Son, who died for our sins that we may have everlasting life, etc. But above these beliefs that lie

at the bottom of the Christian system of beliefs there are numerous others which themselves derive from these fundamental ones. There is, therefore, the possibility or religious dispute, in which appeal is made to a number of different ungrounded, ground-level authorities (e.g. Holy Scripture, Church councils). And as with hypothetical empirical propositions, hypothetical religious propositions must be decided for or against from *within* a particular system. In his lecture on religious belief Wittgenstein writes

> Whether a thing is a blunder of not ---it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another. [*LC*, p.59]

And nine years later he remarks:

> it strikes me that religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. [*CV*, p.64e]

This systemic nature of Christian beliefs allows for different levels of logical fixity within itself, hence hypothetical religious propositions do have their place.

The history of the Christian Church is marked by religious disputes, many of which result in the proclamation of someone as a heretic for putting forth doctrine which is not allowed by the Christian system of beliefs. The multi-level system of Christian beliefs in which this exchange takes place can also be likened to a river. Above the bedrock of creedal beliefs lie many other beliefs which stand as the

river-bed on which still others flow as the river. And as with empirical propositions, the river-bed propositions can become fluid ones (and *vice-versa*). For example, two Christian denominations based on the same bedrock of theology may consider an issue such as abortion in two very different lights. The Roman Catholic Church has placed abortion in the river-bed of its doctrine, whereas the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States allows it to be more fluid. Differences between these views arise from different applications of the same nexus of fundamental beliefs, arisen perhaps from different interpretations of the same scriptures. The deepest bedrock of the Christian faith can also be considered axiomatic in that the manifold of creedal beliefs forms the immobile center around which all other beliefs in the system revolve. But again, as with empirical beliefs, what lies at the axis of the system does so because a consensus among the language and practice of believers holds them so. Wittgenstein again from *On Certainty*:

> What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.
> [*OC*, §144]

This group of central concepts and beliefs are learned together. In order to learn the central tenets of the faith one must learn the concepts 'God', 'sin', 'grace', 'redemption', and others. The whole system of concepts and propositions gradually comes into view in the believer's *employment* of them in his or her life.

In seeing that religious beliefs hold a certain power in our lives, Wittgenstein points to the regulatory function that they serve.

Someone who has an "unshakeable belief" [*LC*, p.54] in the Last Judgement has a belief which regulates his life in different ways. In fact, whether or not someone actually has this belief will come through not merely by what he says but by the degree to which he or she holds this belief before himself or herself *through* the employment of this picture and the changes that result. Wittgenstein compares this kind of belief to the use of a picture, and he mentions two different types of uses for that picture. We may regard the first use as a psychological use of a picture: the believer may sometimes imagine Christ present with him or her in order better to guide his or her conduct when difficult sacrifices must be made or risks taken, for encouragement in troubled times, or as a tool for prayer and meditation [cf. *LC*, p.56]. Many saints have written about such uses of a religious picture in their devotion. A second use to which Wittgenstein refers is the logical role of a picture; that is, the believer uses a religious picture in an explanatory capacity. As I understand it, we are not here to imagine any use of an image, but it seems that Wittgenstein means something more like a religious world-view with which the believer interprets the events of his life and the lives of others. The believer, for example may regard certain personal events, or even world-historical events, as either disciplining punishments or rewarding blessings by God, Whom he or she believes actively participates in the lives of His children. This logical role of the believer's religious world-view governs the believer's thinking in many ways, not mixing with his or her empirical world-view *per se*, but rather representing that which itself *is* most important.

In section 612 of the *On Certainty* notes Wittgenstein likens a dialogue between societies of very different empirical understandings of the world to a dialogue between missionaries and natives [cf. above: Chapter One, p.17]. In this clash between a twentieth-century world-view and that of a primitive tribe, two fundamental systems of propositions and beliefs about the world butt heads, and it would be absurd for one group to try to appeal to some common ground in order to explain how it sees things when precisely where they differ in on the *grounds* for their beliefs and actions. Similarly, when missionaries try and convert natives, if they try and explain their religious world-view from the dead surface of pure doctrine, they are lost. Pictures may be used and concepts taught, but ultimately, as the natives come to understand the new concepts used in this alternative way of thinking about their lives, the final convincing thrust comes as *persuasion*. In trying to witness to someone, a Christian realizes the limits of differences in fundamental beliefs when he or she tries to appeal to something from within the Christian understanding in order to convince someone to become a Christian. A common example of this is appeal to Scripture: How can you convince someone to become a believer on the basis of the authority of Scripture about the fallen state of man, his need for redemption, etc, when the authority of the Bible itself is the object of Christian faith?

Even among people who share the same empirical world-view, when it comes to the differences between religious believers and non-believers, there is an "enormous gulf" separating them.

> 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.
> [*LC*, p.53]

Because the character of a religious belief comes from the role it plays in the believer's life and not from being a kind of hypothetical surmise or rational assent, we cannot say that he or she more or less believes (religiously) in a Last Judgement. The person who says this has completely misunderstood the believer. Though the believer may now and then think about the future in the sense that he or she believes that death is not the end of life, that after death there is something *else*, the believer is not relating his or her opinions about the world-events of the future. Rather, he or she is telling of the picture that guides his or her life. One cannot say "I *possibly* guide my life with this picture," though one can say "I try and fail at guiding my life with this picture." One is not unsure of one's own life-guiding principles in the same way that one is unsure of an empirical hypothesis about an aeroplane flying overhead. The believer, we may say, has learned an entirely different way of thinking and acting, and though he or she may struggle and fail in focussing his or her entire life in the direction of this religious world-view, there can be be no mistake that something entirely new has been adopted. Hence, in the process of spreading a religious understanding, the ultimate effort comes, in whatever form, as persuasion.

As Wittgenstein writes in 1937,

> Religion says: *Do this!* -- *Think like that!* -- but it cannot justify this and once it even tries to, is becomes repellant; because for every reason it offers there is a valid counter-reason. It is more convincing to say: "Think like this! however strangely it may strike you." Or: "Won't you do this? -- however repugnant you find it." [*CV*, p.29e]

The similarities between religious beliefs and fundamental empirical propositions show themselves in their shared "groundlessness" [cf. *OC*, §166] and in a consideration of this act of persuasion on both accounts. But the fact that religious beliefs must be passed on through persuasion in a society in which people already share roughly the same world-view of fundamental empirical beliefs points to some fundamental differences between religious beliefs and fundamental empirical propositions as discussed in *On Certainty*.

Chapter Three

While religious beliefs are in many ways 'fundamental', they are not in any way universal; that is, people don't *naturally* come by them. No world religion commands anything near the massive human consensus that our empirical world-view does, and the reason for this is not that there are a number of world religions competing for only a limited number of believers. According to Wittgenstein, it is part of the character of religious belief that this antipathy between religion and the world be present [cf. *CV* p.33e]. At the outset stand the radical changes in lifestyle and thinking that religious belief requires of the believer. It is clear that with religious belief we're not dealing merely with 'a new way of looking at things', but we're dealing with a new way of living that may require us to sacrifice certain things that we currently enjoy and to adopt a new way of thinking (a religious world-view) which accompanies this life-change and challenges us to accept radically new beliefs about the way we have been living up to this time. It is this antipathy between our lives and thoughts as they stand now and the new lives and thoughts that religion (as Wittgenstein sees it) asks of us that set religious beliefs apart from fundamental empirical beliefs about the world, which everyone comes by in the course of things.

While fundamental empirical propositions and beliefs are learned through the course of learning to speak a language, make judgements about the world, etc., religious beliefs must be explicitly taught. But if religious beliefs are supposed to be fundamental in the sense that they have a regulatory as well as an explanatory role in our

lives and if beliefs of such depth are rooted at bottom in ungrounded ways of *acting* that are rarely if ever enunciated, then how can it be that they are explicitly teachable? We find that Christian religious education consists in the reading of Holy Scripture, learning the creeds and traditions of the Church, seeing pictures, hearing stories, attending worship, talking with mature believers, and so on. Through this kind of instruction it is possible to *shape* someone's life into one guided by religious beliefs [cf. *CV*, p. 85e]. This kind of formation gives one an acquaintance with such concepts and practices as 'sin', 'redemption', 'grace', 'faith', prayer, study of the Scriptures, and worship, through learning them 'explicitly' while *using* them among believers.

But while all this goes on, it is interesting that the 'existence of God' is never taught. Never do we seek to show someone that 'God exists'. If we were to say something at the outset like "Well, there is a God . . ." we would not mean "God exists" (as opposed to "God doesn't exist", i.e., "He's not a thing to be found in space and time") and that we are prepared to demonstrate this. Rather, we mean something like "I'm now going to talk about God". "There is a God" is used here as an introductory comment to the concept 'God' as used in this circumstance (e.g. 'the Christian God' or 'the God of the Bible'). In the sense that the central concept of the whole language-game is itself unprovable, Christian beliefs are groundless.

Furthermore, there comes Wittgenstein's enigmatic remark from 1937:

> Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a

> description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it.
> [*CV*, p. 28e]

While Wittgenstein entertains certain Christian "doctrines" in his investigations (e.g. belief in the Last Judgement), he stresses here that Christianity is *not* a doctrine. What does he mean? Certainly Wittgenstein recognized that Christians do *employ* doctrines. First, as the passage indicates, religious beliefs are not theoretical; that is, they are not used hypothetically. Second, the religious language we use is part of "something that actually takes place in human life." This, it seems to me, is Wittgenstein's main point. Christian doctrines, no matter how defensibly orthodox and logically central to the Christian system of belief, do *not* themselves make up what we can rightly call 'Christian beliefs'; for Christianity, Wittgenstein asserts, entails being redeemed from our old way of life and instead living "*completely* differently." In a remark to M. O'C. Drury sometime in the 1930's, Wittgenstein says:

> If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn't be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different.[1]

And again, in 1937:

> But if I am to be REALLY saved, -- what I need is certainty -- not wisdom, dreams, or speculation -- and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my

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[1] M. O'C. Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein", in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. by Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 114.

> speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind. Perhaps we can say: Only *love* believes the Resurrection. Or: it is *love* that believes the Resurrection. [*CV*, p.33e]

From his anti-doctrinal assertion of 1937 to the above remark written later in the same year, Wittgenstein fills his "not" with something positive. Perhaps we can say that it is love that saves, *love* being far from what Wittgenstein envisions as a "doctrine". Wittgenstein sees Christianity as an experience that is at bottom *real*, as an experience of our deepest feelings and drives that calls on a complete transformation a person's life. Again, Wittgenstein, this time from 1944:

> The Christian religion is only for the man who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the man who experiences infinite torment.
>
> The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul.
>
> The Christian faith -- as I see it -- is a man's refuge in this *ultimate* torment.
>
> Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening up his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart. [*CV*, p.46e]

Doctrine alone cannot accomplish this transforming salvation, but religious language filled with life by its use in a community of believers can. Again Wittgenstein, from 1946:

> The point is that sound doctrine need not *take hold* of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor's prescription. -- But here you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction. [*CV*, p.53e]

In this light we can understand Wittgenstein's fascination with the faith of the Mormons. About them Wittgenstein remarks in a conversation in August of 1949 to O. K. Bouwsma that "something in the heart takes hold."[2] A month later he again remarks to Bouwsma, "A peculiarity of religious beliefs is the great power they have over men's lives."[3]

The need for the explicit teaching of religious belief reflects our need for change. It should not now surprise us that in meeting the religious challenge to change our lives in a radical way we must also learn a new language-game. The religious beliefs that comprise this "new language-game" are therefore taught, yet while they are taught, that instruction includes an essential type of 'showing' that empowers these linguistic expressions with the connections with the religious way of life that they need in order to become truly religious, i.e. life-changing, beliefs. Our tacit assumptions about language that it is more distant from our forms of life than it actually is engender a view that new language need not come with new life, but I think that Wittgenstein's work, by exposing the connection of fundamental beliefs with action, has awakened us to this possibility. Rather than approaching all linguistic expressions for their mere 'surface meaning', or 'surface grammar', we should therefore look and see our many different uses of language in the dynamic forms of life in which each use has its home. Religious language is no exception.

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2 O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), p. 11.

3 *Ibid.*, 56.

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