

The Grammar of Faith. Ludwig Wittgenstein on Madness and Religious Faith

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ABSTRACT. Ludwig Wittgenstein repeatedly called religion and faith “madness”, “folly”, etc. However, this does not mean that he considered it irrational or meaningless. Rather, he saw in it a way of thinking and speaking, a “language-game”, that was not explicitly rational, but nevertheless meaningful, and in which there were “entirely different connections” than normal between individual statements. Nor can the language of faith be regarded as conventional, according to Wittgenstein, even if approached from the point of view of the nature of the statements it contains. If, for example, we think that theological statements are factual statements (as if they refer only to existing things or objects), then this language immediately becomes meaningless. The aim of my study is to analyze the “grammar” of this language (the language of faith or religion), using Wittgenstein’s notes from different times, paragraphs of his published works, comments made during university lectures, etc., and to describe the correct use of words in it.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, madness, religious faith, language-game

Before I write anything about Wittgenstein, let me quote one of his notes from 1947: “Am I the only one who cannot found a school or can a philosopher never do this? I cannot found a school because I do not really want to be imitated. Not at any rate by those who publish articles in philosophical journals.”¹ Wittgenstein

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¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value* (edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, 61e. It is likely that Wittgenstein wrote his note in response to a personal experience mentioned by Norman Malcolm in his memoir: “Wittgenstein was almost as much angered by imperfect representation of his thoughts as by the plagiarism of



therefore did not want to be imitated, especially by those who wrote articles for philosophical journals. (By the way, he was convinced that there was more wisdom in an ordinary crime novel than in all the volumes of *Mind*.) He probably wouldn't have liked to know that long, tedious studies would be written about him after his death.² If, therefore, I do not wish to be disgraceful, I must say that what follows below is not intended to be a study about Wittgenstein, but rather an attempt to organize his thoughts on religion and belief from different times (individual paragraphs of his works, notes, thoughts expressed in lectures, etc.), with the hope that they will show us some kind of a unified train of thought in their fragmentation and dispersion. Of course, I also know that Wittgenstein himself never tried or wanted to form them into a unified whole.

What is normal and what is not?

The first question that anyone who sees this title will probably ask is how these two are connected: insanity and religion, madness and faith. The explanation can be found in one of Wittgenstein's remarks, written in 1931: "Religion as madness is a madness springing from irreligiousness."³ But years later, he still says in a lecture on religious faith (presumably in 1938) that anyone reading Paul's letters will find that they not only say that faith is not rational, but that it is "folly".⁴ It is not

them. He told me of an incident involving a young lady who had attended his lectures. She wrote an article which was intended to present Wittgenstein's views on a certain topic. She submitted it to Moore, the editor of *Mind*, and also showed it to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein thought it was very bad and told her she *could not* publish it. When she persisted in her intention to publish it, Wittgenstein went to Moore to persuade him not to print it. He said to Moore: 'You attended those lectures. You know that her account on them is bad'. According to Wittgenstein, Moore admitted that 'It wasn't good', but was not dissuaded from publishing the piece. It was clear to me that Wittgenstein had been very much vexed and excited by this incident." Norman Malcolm: *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir (With a Biographical Sketch by G. H. von Wright)*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, 50.

² Of course, we do not have to accept Wittgenstein's dismal opinion of those who "publish articles in philosophical journals". The truth is that after his death, but especially from the '70s onwards, many excellent studies and even several independent volumes were written on Wittgenstein's philosophical views on religion. Probably the most important of these is D. Z. Phillips' now classic book, which is in fact a collection of studies: *Wittgenstein and Religion*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993. Although it is true that it is still controversial in many respects, this book, especially its chapter titled: *Religious Beliefs and Language Games* (a study originally published in 1970), did much to popularize Wittgenstein's philosophical views on religion.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 13e.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (edited by Cyril Barrett), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, 58.

only that faith is not rational, but that it does not claim to be of that nature. Religion and faith, then, at least in Wittgenstein's understanding, are a kind of madness, a form of foolishness, and it is most characteristic that for Wittgenstein this raises above all a methodological question, the question of *understanding*: how can one understand madness? Is it understandable at all? – Let me add right away that although the question or the direction of the question may be purely methodological, dealing with madness is still a “personal matter” for Wittgenstein – just like pretty much every other topic was deeply personal for him.⁵ In 1946, for example, he wrote: “I am often afraid of madness.”⁶ Two years earlier, he had formulated the same idea with almost aphoristic demand and persuasive power: “If in life we are surrounded by death, so too in the health of our intellect we are surrounded by madness.”⁷

Nevertheless, it is a fact that his question about madness, however personal it may have been to him, is purely methodological: how can one understand madness? To answer, as so often, Wittgenstein clings to the ideas of others, but only to refute them. In this case, his starting point is one of Freud's thoughts, whom he did not particularly admire: “Freud writes excellently and it is a pleasure to read him, but his writing is never *great*.”⁸ Freud's relevant thought, at least in the form Wittgenstein understood it (and recorded for himself in 1938), is as follows: “Freud's idea: In madness the lock is not destroyed, only altered; the old key can no longer unlock it, but it could be opened by a differently constructed key.”⁹ Is this true? – Wittgenstein asks. Is what Polonius said about Hamlet true, that “Though this be madness, yet there is method in't”? When do we say people go mad, and when do we say that they act normally?

This is a question that Wittgenstein explores in his 1945 work *Philosophical Investigations*, published only after his death. In order to better understand the following ideas, it is necessary to know that for Wittgenstein (who also taught for a short period at an elementary school in Trattenbach in the early 1920s, including mathematics, while hitting and beating children), human behavior is basically a rule-abiding behavior acquired by “training”; through this training we learn to play

⁵ As Wright puts it in his brief biographical sketch to Malcolm's memoir: “It is probably true that he [Wittgenstein] lived on the border of mental illness. A fear of being driven across it followed him throughout his life.” Norman Malcolm: *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A memoir (With a Biographical Sketch by G. H. von Wright)*, 4.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 53e.

⁷ *Idem*, 44e.

⁸ *Idem*, 87e.

⁹ *Idem*, 33e.

certain “language-games” (we learn to follow certain language rules in our lives).¹⁰ It is no coincidence that Wittgenstein, in order to give an example in his *Philosophical Investigations* to illustrate the difference between normal and abnormal behavior, chooses a situation of teaching someone mathematics, the *language-game* of mathematics (§ 143):

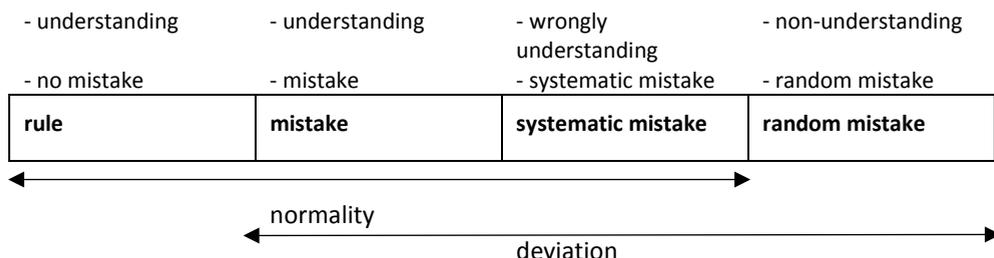
“Let’s now examine the following kind of language-game: when A gives an order, B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule. Let the first of these series be that of the natural numbers in the decimal system. – How does he come to understand this system? First of all, series of numbers are written down for him, and he is required to copy them. (Don’t balk at the expression ‘series of numbers’; it is not being used wrongly here.) And here already there is a normal and an abnormal learner’s reaction. – At first, perhaps, we guide his hand in writing out the series 0 to 9; but then the *possibility of communication* will depend on his going on to write it down by himself. – And here we may imagine, for example, that he does copy the figures by himself, but not in the right order: he writes sometimes one, sometimes another, at random. And at *that* point communication stops. – Or again, he makes ‘mistakes’ in the order. – The difference between this and the first case will of course be one of frequency. – Or he makes a *systematic* mistake; for example, he copies every other number, or he copies the series 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ... like this: 1, 0, 3, 2, 5, 4, Here we shall almost be tempted to say that he has understood us *wrongly*. Notice, however, that there is no sharp distinction between a random and a systematic mistake. That is, between what you are inclined to call a ‘random’ and what a ‘systematic’ one. Perhaps it is possible to wean him from the systematic mistake (as from a bad habit). Or perhaps one accepts his way of copying and tries to teach him the normal one as an offshoot, a variant of his. – And here too, our pupil’s ability to learn may come to an end.”¹¹

Assuming that rule-abiding behavior is what can be called “normal” and irregular is what is called “abnormal”, then the main message of Wittgenstein’s example is that

¹⁰ Fania Pascal, who taught Wittgenstein Russian in the ‘30s and to whom he once gave a lengthy confession about one of the incidents in which he beat a little girl, recalls it as the most disturbing part of the confession. As he spoke, she says, Wittgenstein apparently had little control over himself, and that he experienced the incident (he hit the little girl who went to complain to the headmaster, but he denied it) as an early crisis in his “manhood”, as an exceptional “trauma” — although it is not entirely clear from the account whether physical aggression was his real trauma or the fact that he lied about it. In any case, Pascal argues, this was the incident that led Wittgenstein to “give up teaching, perhaps made him realize that he ought to live as a solitary”. (Rush Rhees (ed.): *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, 37-38.)

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* (translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte), Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, 62e-63e.

there is “no sharp distinction” between the two: the difference between what is simply a mistake and what we call a “random” mistake consists only in the frequency of mistakes; similarly, there is no sharp distinction between “systematic” and “random” mistakes. In other words, there is no sharp distinction between normal and abnormal, so we can never say exactly when we crossed the “border” of normality; exactly how far what we call normal human behavior extends and where madness begins. Graphically, perhaps this whole idea could be illustrated as follows:



The other message of this example is that if someone makes mistakes too often, if he keeps making mistakes, it indicates that he is unable to master the language-game we are trying to teach him. This is called deviation, madness, mental disturbance, which we can try to describe or “diagnose” “from the outside” but, as we will see later, there is no common ground for *understanding* it.

In Wittgenstein’s other posthumous work, *On Certainty*, we find a very similar example, which no longer relates to “training” to rule-abiding behavior and deviation from the rule, but specifically to mental disturbance, but which Wittgenstein approaches from the same point of view of “error” and “mistake”. The example found in § 67 is as follows:

“Could we imagine a man who keeps on making mistakes where we regard a mistake as ruled out, and in fact never encounter one? E.g. he says he lives in such and such a place, is so and so old, comes from such and such a city, and he speaks with the same certainty (giving all the tokens of it) as I do, but he is wrong. But what is his relation to this error? What am I to suppose?”¹²

Continuation of the example in § 71:

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969, 11e.

“If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a *mistake*, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.”¹³

Finally, the conclusion of the reasoning in § 73 and 74:

“But what is the difference between mistake and mental disturbance? Or what is the difference between my treating it as a mistake and my treating it as mental disturbance?”

“Can we say: a *mistake* doesn’t only have a cause, it also has a ground? I.e., roughly: when someone makes a mistake, can be fitted into what he knows aright.”¹⁴

The bottom-line, then, is that my *reaction* to mistakes and mental disturbance will be different: I will teach the former, that is, the one who is merely wrong, because error can still be inserted into the basis of one’s right knowledge – but not the latter. In the former case, we can still explain where he was wrong, and the person will probably admit that he was wrong: the possibility of such mistakes is included in all language-games (as the possibility of deviating from the rule), they are part of the *nature* of language-games, because all language-games are based on the fact that it makes sense to talk about correct knowledge and error.

The question then arises, what should religion be regarded: mistake or mental disturbance? It seems that for Wittgenstein it is neither this nor that. Rather, it is a form of thinking that is not reasonable but nevertheless *meaningful*, although it is characterized by a specific logic of internal connections. In his lectures on religious faith, he illustrates this with the following example: suppose, he says, that we arrive on an island, and we observe that the people who live there have different faiths, some of which we would be inclined to call “religious”; the people who live there make various statements, some of which seem to us to be religious statements. The point, Wittgenstein argues, is that they differ from statements reflecting other beliefs not only because of their *subject*, but in fact it is the “entirely different connections” between the statements that make them religious.¹⁵ – And there will be situations, he adds, when we simply won’t be able to decide whether it’s a religious belief or simply some kind of erroneous opinion. In some situations we will say that indigenous people “reason wrongly”, and in other situations we will say that they “don’t reason at all”; or, possibly, “it is an entirely different kind of reasoning” from ours.¹⁶ The first

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 58.

¹⁶ Idem.

we would say if their reasoning resembled ours and they made mistakes similar to ours, because every error, says Wittgenstein, is a mistake in one system (just as what is a misdemeanor in one game is not a misdemeanor in another). Or we could say (and this would be the second situation) that “where we are reasonable, they are not” – which would mean that “they don’t use reason here”.¹⁷

If we take the latter as Wittgenstein’s final word on this issue, we might conclude that for him religion is a peculiar, explicitly non-rational way of thinking, which does not mean that it is “meaningless” or “irrational”. On the contrary, he, as he mentions later, considered “unreasonable” precisely those attempts which aimed to rationalize the otherwise non-rational faith (he mentions by name a certain Father O’Hara as a representative of this aspiration).¹⁸ Another idea that comes up in this example is that it is not always easy to distinguish between belief and erroneous opinion, and that it is more difficult to do so the more a system of belief resembles our rational thinking. It also follows (Wittgenstein dwells on this idea at length earlier) that if something can only be clearly identified as a religious belief if it *differs* from our rational thinking, then it is inherently impossible to argue with it in a rational way of debating. “These controversies”, Wittgenstein says, referring to the controversies that believers have with non-believers, “look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive. The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business.”¹⁹ So if faith is not rational, we can hardly rationally argue for it, and if there were evidence, there would be no faith.

Another alternative worth exploring (assuming we start from Freud’s hypothesis that there is a “key” to madness) is whether what we call rule-abiding (i.e., normal) behavior can be *private*, so to speak. Is it possible for a rule to be followed by only one person and only once in life? Or, in other words: what do we accept as rule-abiding behavior? Where is the line between rule-abiding and non-abiding behavior? Can every action be described as rule-abiding behavior? (For example, when someone randomly copies numbers, can we say that he still follows a rule but only follows it once?) The whole question, which Wittgenstein also explores quite lengthy in his *Philosophical Investigations*, concerns the issue of so-called “private language”, and this is probably one of the most famous and controversial arguments in this work.

¹⁷ Idem, 59.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Idem, 56.

In § 199, he states:

“Is what we call ‘following a rule’ something that it would be possible for only *one* person, only *once* in a lifetime, to do? – And this is, of course, a gloss on the *grammar* of the expression ‘to follow a rule.’”²⁰

And Wittgenstein’s answer, of course, is *no*:

“It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on. – To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have mastered a technique.”²¹

It is therefore not possible, Wittgenstein argues, for someone to speak a “private” language, because to understand a language is to learn and master a technique, that is, to follow certain human habits and institutions – and precisely because they are institutions, language-games cannot be private in nature.

A few paragraphs later, in 206, he writes:

“Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts to the order and training *thus*, and another *otherwise*? Who is right, then? Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? Shared human behavior is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.”²²

The same thought in *On Certainty* (§ 254): “Any ‘reasonable’ person behaves like *this*.”²³ Thus, we can understand a language unknown to us only by referring it to a *common* human way of acting (i.e., the way in which all “reasonable” people behave), so we would not have a common “system of reference” for understanding a private language. That is why I said earlier that although we can try to describe or diagnose mental disorder or disturbance from the outside, we would lack a common system of reference (a common ground) to understand it.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, 87e.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² *Idem*, 88e.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *On Certainty*, 33e.

Wittgenstein's position, in short, is that individual and one-time rule obeying cannot be called rule obeying: there is no such thing as private language, a game that is played by only one person and only once. A language without rules cannot be called a language because a rule cannot be followed only once. – There is therefore no “method” in madness, it has no language that we can understand, because a language (being an institution) can only be understood based on a common human way of acting: that is, on the ground of how *reasonable* people behave. This is, then, Wittgenstein's answer to Freud: madness has no internal system, we cannot understand it, we do not have a “key”, so to speak, with which we could “unlock” it.

The grammar of faith

But how does this relate to the problem of religion and faith? To answer this question, we should perhaps turn to one of Wittgenstein's aphorisms, which is the last entry in *Zettel* (§ 717): “‘You can't hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed’. –That is a grammatical remark.”²⁴ But if this is a grammatical remark, as Wittgenstein claims, then it tells us that the language of faith is the *par excellence* private language: you do not hear God speak to others. And yet, unlike madness, we tend to regard the language of religion as meaningful. So how can this language be meaningful, what exactly is the *grammar* of this language? Because, once again, even though it is private, we tend to think that this language is meaningful. (How do we know, for example, that Abraham really heard God's voice and was not just a madman trying to murder his son Isaac? – because we do not hear God speak to someone else, so we do not hear Him speak to Abraham either.)

As a guide to the grammar of this language, that is, the language of faith, and the correct use of words in this specific language-game, we can perhaps take one of Wittgenstein's notes from the *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 373): “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)”²⁵ Theology, then, is a kind of grammar (i.e., it describes only the rules of the language of faith), and this grammar itself tells us where the “objects” spoken of in the language of faith can be classified. This time, Wittgenstein's idea is difficult (or mysterious), so I must turn for help to the study of the late Robert L. Arrington: *Theology as Grammar* (which is an excellent study, whatever Wittgenstein thought of those publishing articles in philosophical journals). According to Arrington, the meaning of the idea is as

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Zettel* (edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, 124e.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, 123e.

follows: if we take the language of theology as a *descriptive* language, if we think that theology speaks of existing things or objects (i.e., it is not mere grammar), then this language immediately becomes meaningless – and not necessarily because God is not an “object”. Indeed, statements that theologians usually make (such as “God exists” or “God is love”) turn out to be meaningless not only when applied to a thing or object called God, but also when they are treated as factual (or descriptive) statements at all. The problem, then, is not only that God is not an object, but also that no statement about God is a factual statement.²⁶ (That is, it is completely irrelevant whether God is considered an object or a person here: the word “God”, says Wittgenstein, in his lectures on religion, “is amongst the earliest learnt – pictures and catechisms, etc. [...] The word is used like a word representing a person. God sees, rewards, etc.” But “if the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of”.²⁷ So the statement that “God exists” has a completely different grammatical status from those that refer to the existence of some object or person known to us.)

These statements, Arrington argues, are not factual statements about some object or person named God, but rather “grammatical remarks expressing rules for the use of theological terms in everyday religious discourse”.²⁸ They show us how the word “God” must be used correctly in the language or language-game of religious faith. “One is simply not talking of God if there is any question about his existence, if, that is to say, it makes sense to wonder *whether* he exists.”²⁹ For the believer, God exists by definition, and the word God he uses, says Arrington, is such that (at least in Christianity) it is immediately associated with the concept of “love”. Thus, “God is love” is not a factual statement, but a grammatical remark that shows one of the rules for using the word God. (Such as statements like “I am a sinner”, “God loves me”, “God had a purpose in taking this child”, which show us only the rules for using the words like “sin”, “God”, etc.) “These rules constitute or create the language of religious belief.”³⁰

So, there is nothing wrong with the language of theology, Arrington adds, and there is nothing wrong “precisely because it consists of a set of rules for the proper employment of religious terms”.³¹ (It also follows that one can *err* in the use

²⁶ See Robert L. Arrington: ‘*Theology as Grammar*’ Wittgenstein and some critics, in: Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (editors): *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, 167-183, 172.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 59.

²⁸ Robert L. Arrington: ‘*Theology as Grammar*’ Wittgenstein and some critics, 172.

²⁹ Idem.

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ Idem.

of religious expressions – and if one can err, then the language of faith cannot be private in the first place. We could even say that Wittgenstein (re)discovers here a paradoxical feature of the nature of faith that has long been known, namely that it is both deeply personal and yet *common*.) There would be a problem with this language, Arrington continues, only if the theologian believed that he was making factual statements about God, because in that case he would not be a theologian, but “a metaphysician who had confused grammatical and factual investigations”.³² There is therefore nothing wrong with theology, as long as it is merely grammar. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with an atheist (or, as Arrington calls it, an “atheologian”) saying “God does not exist”, as long as it is merely a grammatical rule statement that tells us that he is playing a language-game in which the use of the word God is meaningless: there are no rules for the use of the word God in this language. “But the atheologian would be making a confused metaphysical claim if he thought he was giving us a truth about the world: in fact there is no God. He would be confusing grammatical and factual assertions.”³³

However, according to Arrington, “the fact that theological statements are grammatical ones does not entail that all religious statements are factual, descriptive ones”.³⁴ (Descriptive in the sense that they merely express some grammatical rule.) “Some may be – for example, ‘I am a sinner’ and ‘God loves me’, and ‘God had a purpose in taking this child’ – but others, many others, will be prescriptive in nature, giving one edicts for how to live one’s life.”³⁵ And by considering them central to religious life, Arrington adds, “Wittgenstein is simply saying that ‘living a certain kind of life’ is at the heart of religious discourse and action – *not* an investigation into or speculation about the nature of the world”.³⁶

And here again it is worth pausing and lingering for a moment, because this question (i.e. “what does it mean to believe?”, “what does it mean to live a religious life?”) is undoubtedly the most important question of Wittgenstein’s reflections on the philosophy of religion, and as such it is again deeply personal, as evidenced by several of his notes in *Culture and Value*. It seems, then, that Wittgenstein was looking for faith, looking for ways to reach the state of faith – at least some of his remarks suggest something like this. His best-known and probably most quoted note in this respect is from 1947:

³² Idem. A reference to *Zettel* § 458 (82e), where Wittgenstein writes that “the essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations”.

³³ Idem.

³⁴ Idem, 173.

³⁵ Idem.

³⁶ Idem.

“It strikes me that a 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. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. It would be as though someone were first to let me see the hopelessness of my situation and then show me the means of rescue until, of my own accord, or not at any rate led to it by my *instructor*, I ran to it and grasped it.”³⁷

The same idea in another, otherwise beautiful, aphoristic formulation back in 1945:

“It is as though I had lost my way and asked someone the way home. He says he will show me and walks with me along a nice smooth path. This suddenly stops. And now my friend tells me: ‘All you have to do now is find your way home from here.’”³⁸

And finally, one more note from 1946:

“I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.)”³⁹

Wittgenstein thus seemingly have believed that the language of faith (or the language of “instruction” in religious faith) was only partly constituted by what he called the description of the “system of reference”, that is, the description or “portrayal” of basic grammatical rules. (We could say in other words: theology.) Because, on the other hand, this language is “appeal to conscience”, a “prescriptive” way of speaking, which must achieve that we “taking hold” of this system of reference with passion and of our own accord, and navigate the world accordingly; to play this language-game, and thus to change our whole lives. Because, once one accepts that “God exists” as the basic rule of grammar (which is in fact a pleonasm or tautology), then he will use all his other statements about the world according to this grammar. Similarly, if a person accepts that one of the basic grammatical rules for using the word God is “God is love”, then he will presumably live his whole life in that spirit. The believer’s faith, says Wittgenstein, will not manifest itself in various lines of thought or in ordinary references to the foundations of faith, “but rather by

³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 64e.

³⁸ *Idem*, 46-47e.

³⁹ *Idem*, 53e.

regulating for in all his life".⁴⁰ Arrington is probably right, then, when he stresses that, for Wittgenstein, the essence of religion or belief is not some inquiry or speculation, but a way of life, which Wittgenstein calls "a way of living", a changed "direction" of our lives, etc. – He allegedly once told his friend Drury (who wanted to be a theologian at that time) that "if you and I are to live a religious life, it mustn't be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different".⁴¹

It is important to add that, according to Wittgenstein, the language of religion isn't descriptive not only in the sense that it only describes rules of language, but also in the sense that it merely reports some historical events: for example, what the historical Jesus said and did. Because no historical report can ground the Christian faith adequately, given that the kind of "indisputability" that normally characterizes historical facts would hardly be enough to change our entire lives. Christianity, then, says Wittgenstein in his lectures on religious faith, "doesn't rest on an historic basis in the sense that the ordinary belief in historic facts could serve as a foundation". "Here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts. Even, they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions. Those people who had faith didn't apply the doubt, which would ordinarily apply to *any* historical propositions. Especially propositions of a time long past, etc."⁴²

The language of faith, then, is not merely the language of the historical accounts of the Gospels, and if this is so, it also follows, somewhat astonishingly, that the foundation of the Christian faith would not be shaken even if historians proved that not a word of the Gospels was true in the *historical* sense. Because Christianity, once again, is not based on a shared belief in events that have taken place a long time ago. "Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this [...] because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief." – Wittgenstein recorded in 1937.⁴³ Faith, then, is by no means the same language-game that a historian plays when he talks about historical evidence (for example, Ernest Renan when he writes his book on the life of Jesus), and even if there is such a historical account in the language of faith, it has a very *specific* (i.e. not merely historical) significance. Or the same thought, from a little earlier, but also from 1937:

⁴⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 54.

⁴¹ Rush Rhees (ed.): *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 114.

⁴² Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 57.

⁴³ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 32e.

“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. — There is nothing *paradoxical* about that!”⁴⁴

It seems, after all, (or at least the above notes suggest something like this) that Wittgenstein sought faith, sought the answer to the question of how to arrive at a state of faith.⁴⁵ Why he sought faith would be difficult to say simply and succinctly, although in the *Culture and Value* we find some thoughts that may explain this search for faith. One such thought from 1946 sounds like this: “It says that wisdom is all cold; and that you can no more use it for setting your life to rights than you can forge iron when it is *cold*.”⁴⁶ Right the next note: “Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*.”⁴⁷ One year later, in 1947: “Wisdom is cold and to that extent stupid. (Faith on the other hand is a passion.) It might also be said: Wisdom merely *conceals* life from you. (Wisdom is like cold grey ash, covering up the glowing embers.)”⁴⁸ Also in 1947: “‘Wisdom is grey’. Life on the other hand and religion are full of colour.”⁴⁹ – It seems that Wittgenstein considered wisdom insufficient for life, because it is cold, because it is grey and because it is stupid, and that he sought the passion for living life in religion. (Which also shows that he undoubtedly learned one or two things from Kierkegaard, such as that faith is passion and that our faith is justified by our whole lives, by our actions.⁵⁰)

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ He also allegedly told Drury that “I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view”. (Rush Rhees (ed.): *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 79). On Wittgenstein’s religiosity, see a book by another of his friends, Norman Malcolm: *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* Routledge, London, 1993, especially its first chapter, *A religious man?* (7-23).

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 53e.

⁴⁷ Idem.

⁴⁸ Idem, 56e.

⁴⁹ Idem, 62e.

⁵⁰ On Kierkegaard’s influence on Wittgenstein’s thinking, see Genia Schönbaumsfeld’s excellent book (*A Confusion of the Spheres. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), who discusses Kierkegaard’s influence separately in Wittgenstein’s “early” and “late” periods. Perhaps the most relevant part for us is Chapter 4 of the book, in which Schönbaumsfeld examines the extent to which Kierkegaard’s and Wittgenstein’s views on religious belief are related.

Faith and certainty

But can I say with passion, Wittgenstein asks, rather between the lines, in his book *On Certainty*, that this is my foot? The question is astounding, but logical, provided we accept Wittgenstein's position that our whole life, and all our actions, are based on various unfounded beliefs, and that these beliefs are justified by our life, that is, by the way we act. But isn't the same true for religious faith? From this point of view, therefore, it is indeed a question whether there is a difference between faith and faith, and if the peculiarity of religious faith is that it is passionate, it is reasonable to ask whether this passion is *unique* to religious faith. So, can I say, once again, with passion, that this is my foot? And perhaps even more astounding than the question is that Wittgenstein's answer is *yes*. "I may claim with passion that I know that this (for example) is my foot.", he recorded on March 17, 1951.⁵¹ But what does that mean? What follows from this? Does it follow that there is no *qualitative* difference between our religious beliefs and our other, ordinary beliefs? Wittgenstein's answer can be found partly in this same posthumous book, partly again in *Culture and Value*.

Wittgenstein's reasoning was initiated by the argument of George E. Moore, who, in his *A Defense of Common Sense*, lists some statements that he does not think are even worth mentioning, all of which he *knows* to be true. Moore was trying to demonstrate in this way the nature of our everyday knowledge, namely that it is of a nature that we cannot even think of doubting.⁵² Similarly, in his essay *Proof of an External World* and in a lecture of the same title at the British Academy, he argued that a convincing way to prove the existence of his hands was simply to show one of them and make a gesture with it: that this is my hand, I simply know – this is an ultimate, unquestionable evidence of common sense.⁵³ Wittgenstein's answer (who, again, clings to other people's ideas here only to refute them) is that Moore cannot *know* that it is his hand, because with explicit knowledge we can only dispose of what we doubt or *can* doubt at all. Moore cannot, reasonably, doubt that it is his hand, and consequently he cannot know it – and therefore here we are simply dealing with the misuse of the word "know" by someone (most typical of philosophers).

Wittgenstein's position, in contrast to Moore's, is that all our doubts are preceded by unprovable, unfounded beliefs. – I believe that the Earth existed before I was born, and God did not create it in the last half hour. In the same way, I believe

⁵¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *On Certainty*, 49e.

⁵² See: George Edward Moore: *A Defense of Common Sense*, in: George Edward Moore: *Selected Writings* (edited by Thomas Baldwin), Routledge, London and New York, 1993, 106-133.

⁵³ See: George Edward Moore: *Proof of an External World*, in: George Edward Moore: *Selected Writings*, 147-170.

that this is my hand: I do not doubt it, nor can I doubt it. My unfounded beliefs are justified by the equally unfounded action, my whole life: I act without ever having any doubt whether it is my hand: I simply prepare the tea there. “My life shows 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.” (§ 7)⁵⁴ So I act in the spirit of that faith, and my faith is justified by my whole life, by the way I act. But, as we have seen, the same is true for religious belief: that it is also groundless, and that it is justified by our whole lives. And yet, there must be a difference between faith and faith, and the only difference we can point out is *passion*. Religious belief may be “a passionate commitment to a system of reference”, but in the case of the statement “this is my foot”, that passion seems superfluous, irrelevant, and even comical.

And yet, Wittgenstein is not at all telling us that we cannot speak passionately about our feet, but rather that (on the one hand) this passion is quite *rare* when we talk about our feet, and that (on the other hand) even if it is present, it always expresses something very *specific* (unusual). Let us look at Wittgenstein’s reasoning in its entirety, and not just the opening thought: “I may claim with passion that I know that this (for example) is my foot.” (§ 376) “But this passion is after all something very rare, and there is no trace of it when I talk of this foot in the ordinary way.” (§ 377). “I say with passion ‘I know that this is a foot’ – but what does it mean?” (§ 379). “I might go on: ‘Nothing in the world will convince me of the opposite!’ For me this fact is at the bottom of all knowledge. I shall give up other things but not this.” (§ 380) “This ‘Nothing in the world’ is obviously an attitude which one hasn’t got towards everything one believes or is certain of.” (§ 381) “That is not to say that nothing in the world will in fact be able to convince me of anything else.” (§ 382)⁵⁵ – Even our most basic beliefs are therefore not without doubt, Wittgenstein argues, and yet it is possible that in some cases (for example, if it has been amputated) I doubt whether this leg is really mine (the example is morbid, I know, but this is Wittgenstein’s example; he participated as a soldier in the First World War, and during the second he worked in a hospital).

So, Wittgenstein says, I can speak passionately about my feet, for example in a (quite rare) speech situation where I want to emphasize that for me this is a fact (“this is my foot”) that lies on the bottom of all knowledge, that I will not give up, that no one and nothing will ever convince me otherwise. This does not mean, however, that *nothing* in the world can really convince me otherwise. Even our most basic everyday beliefs are not without doubt, Wittgenstein argues – which is not true of religious faith. If, therefore, we look for the difference between faith and

⁵⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *On Certainty*, 2e.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, 49e.

faith, we will find it in the fact that religious faith is unshakable and free from all doubt: it is of such a nature that there can be no doubt attached to it. We may doubt all our other common beliefs, however fundamental they may be, except religious beliefs. “This in one sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs”, says Wittgenstein in his lectures on religious faith, “because the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on things which are by far better established for him.”⁵⁶

One of the conclusions that can be traced from the above sentence (among everything else) is that if religious belief is “unshakeable”,⁵⁷ as Wittgenstein puts it, it is not because it is more *grounded* than any other faith. (As we have seen before, if faith is not rational by its very nature, it can hardly be rationally argued.) On the contrary, says Wittgenstein: “An honest religious thinker”, he wrote in 1948, “is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.”⁵⁸ It may be said, therefore, that the thoughts of the religious thinker have no foundation, as if he was walking in the air, and yet he walks firmly on this ground. Similarly, Wittgenstein argues, believers are not convinced of faith by various proofs, such as so-called “proofs of God”. In 1950, the penultimate year of his life, he recorded the following:

“A proof of God’s existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their ‘belief’ an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. Perhaps one could ‘convince someone that God exists’ by means of a certain kind of upbringing, by shaping his life in such and such a way.”⁵⁹

Thus, religious belief is not free from doubt because its foundation is more solid: believers have not formed their faith based on some proofs of God, but rather “analyze” it with the help of them, so to speak. (It is like saying that Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologiae* was read by Wittgenstein, did not prove the “existence” of God with his five proofs or “ways”, but merely analyzed the concept of God; his investigations were conceptual, not factual.) Believing, at least according to Wittgenstein, as we saw earlier when discussing the question of the historical authenticity of the Gospels, may be “the result of a life”. What exactly this means can be revealed by the continuation of the above quote:

⁵⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 54.

⁵⁷ *Idem*.

⁵⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 73e.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, 85e.

“Life”, he writes here, “can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the ‘existence of this being’, but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us.”⁶⁰

If we live enough, life, with its sufferings, can “force on us”, so to speak, the concept of God; we experience, we think, and we can come to this concept. But not in some “mystical” experience that “reveals” the existence of God, nor in sensual experiences that show us the “existence” of this being – whatever that means.

Similarly, says Wittgenstein, the believer does not believe in the way of *probability*: for him God’s existence is not a *hypothesis* accepted because of its great plausibility. This is unlikely because he believes in a way of unshakable *certainty*. A believer who believes that “God exists” does not think he has good or convincing evidence for this. This is not a hypothesis on his part, and this is why, says Wittgenstein, we do not encounter a situation in religious controversies where one party is certain of something and the other says, “well, possibly”.⁶¹ (He once asked Drury: “Can you imagine St. Augustine saying that the existence of God is ‘highly probable’?”⁶²) Or, as he writes in *Culture and Value*, if man, as a believer, ponders the strength of temptation and the frailty of human nature, he does not think according to the logic of either/or, because to assume that one of the two forces must necessarily prevail is not a religious idea at all, but a “scientific hypothesis”. “So if you want to stay within the religious sphere you must *struggle*”, he adds.⁶³ To think, then, that one of two forces fighting each other, the power of temptation and the frailty of human nature, must prevail is not the mindset of the believer, but of some practitioner of science. The religious person simply *fights* temptation, knowing his own frailty, trusting that God is on his side in this struggle, because “religious faith”, Wittgenstein writes, is nothing more than “trusting”.⁶⁴

Religious faith, then, once again, is a faith which is unshakable, which cannot therefore be disputed or argued against. It is a recurring thought among Wittgenstein’s notes on religious faith, Arrington writes, “that religious believers do not hold their central beliefs with probability or well-grounded confidence; they hold them with

⁶⁰ Idem, 86e.

⁶¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 56.

⁶² Rush Rhees (ed.): *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 90.

⁶³ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value*, 86e.

⁶⁴ Idem, 72e.

certainty, ‘unshakably’ as Wittgenstein puts it”.⁶⁵ Surely this is the case, he adds, with statements like “God exists”. This is not a hypothesis on their part, not even a well-grounded one. “It is a belief held unshakably, one totally removed from the traffic of debate and argument, one that has no uncertainty attached to it.”⁶⁶ – If we return to Wittgenstein’s remark that theology is grammar, this idea could be rephrased as follows: the fundamental statements of theology are grammatical statements that cannot be disputed, since they lay down precisely the rules of the use of language. Playing this language-game, you must follow *these* rules.

If such statements, writes Earl Stanley B. Fronda in his book on Wittgenstein’s religious thought, are taken as “substantial” statements, if they are taken as saying *something* about the world, they “become meaningless (i.e. they will fail to function in the way they are intended to, which is to make claims that can in principle be tested for factual truth or falsity)”.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, such statements have their uses, he adds, provided they are treated as “grammatical statements”.⁶⁸ Their “real function is to show the rules for the use of words”.⁶⁹ Therefore, these statements are inherently true, and their truth is so obvious or self-evident that anyone familiar with this language-game will normally say when we phrase them: “Of course!”. And everything suggests, he adds, that the statement “God exists” is such a “grammatical statement” in religious language.⁷⁰ That is, it is not a substantive (or factual) statement, because it does not claim that God actually exists, but simply analyzes the concept of God, which includes existence in the same way that, for example, the concept of the road includes having length. – Fronda’s interpretation seems to be supported by the fact that precisely in connection with such statements (i.e. statements that cannot be doubted) Wittgenstein says in his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* that they are, so to speak, grammatical propositions: “To accept a proposition as unshakably certain – I want to say – means to use it as a grammatical rule; this removes uncertainty from it.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Robert L. Arrington: *Theology as Grammar’ Wittgenstein and some critics*, 176.

⁶⁶ Idem.

⁶⁷ Earl Stanley B. Fronda: *Wittgenstein’s (Misunderstood) Religious Thought*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2010, 120.

⁶⁸ Idem.

⁶⁹ Idem.

⁷⁰ Idem, 121., 128.

⁷¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (edited by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe), The M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1964, 81e.

And if “God exists” is a statement that expresses a basic grammatical rule, then that means that all other propositions we use to describe the world will be formulated according to this rule. As Arrington puts it: if we accept “God exists” as a grammatical rule, then this is “a way of giving meaning to everything we say about the world: all aspects of nature and human nature are to be understood in terms of their source in God and in terms of God’s providential relation to his creatures”.⁷² We will use, thus, all our statements about the world according to this grammatical rule, because adhering to this grammatical rule presupposes “all descriptions, decisions, etc., be formulated or completed in terms of the notion of God’s creative power, God’s judgments, God’s grace, or God’s love and anger”.⁷³ What is at stake here, he writes, is a system of reference or “representation”, that is, “a way of talking and thinking about all things”.⁷⁴

“And to say that the religious believer is passionately committed to this system of reference is to say that it stands fast for him, that he takes it as a matter of course.”⁷⁵

Grammatical statements, then, are “self-evident”, in the sense that they reflect well-known and immutable rules (immutable as far as their *application* is concerned) for the correct use of words. So, if anyone speaks of God at all, he must speak of Him as if He exists, otherwise he would be misusing the word God (this is not proof of God, but a grammatical rule). Denying God’s existence here would be simply absurd, since in this language-game we cannot even articulate what it would be like if God did *not* actually exist. (There can neither be a description of what it would be like if there were *no* God nor what it would be like if there *were* God, as Fronda mentions.) Therefore, “God exists” is a grammatical statement for the believer because there can be no doubt attached to it. Not because God really, factually exists (nothing can be said about this factually), but because in the language-game he plays, this is the most basic rule of grammar.⁷⁶

⁷² Robert L. Arrington: *‘Theology as Grammar’ Wittgenstein and some critics*, 176.

⁷³ *Idem.*

⁷⁴ *Idem.*

⁷⁵ *Idem.*

⁷⁶ A preliminary version of this study was published in Hungarian in the 2022/67 issue of the philosophical journal ‘Kellék’.