Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in Vienna in 1899, the youngest child of Fanny and Karl Wittgenstein. Fanny was a Roman Catholic. So, baby Ludwig was baptized and instructed in that faith. Karl, a free-thinking Protestant like his father, was descended from a distinguished Jewish family which had changed the family name from Meier to Wittgenstein. Karl, a prominent industrialist, dominated the home. He was a patron of the arts; in fact, he took early retirement to devote his energies to patronage of the visual arts. Bruno Walter testifies to the remarkable musical evenings that he spent at the Wittgenstein residence. The family home was a gathering place for Viennese intellectuals and artists. One of Klimt’s most famous canvases portrays Marguerita (Greta) Wittgenstein on her wedding day. Her younger sister, Hermine, was a noteworthy painter in the early twentieth century. The *Concerto for the Left Hand* was written for brother Paul who became a famous concert pianist and lost his right arm in World War I. Religion was not considered an interesting topic in the Wittgenstein home.¹

Like his three brothers and four sisters, Ludwig was educated at home by tutors who soon informed his parents that young Ludwig was a lackadaisical student. Karl, then, took exception to the usual way he thought his children should be schooled and sent Ludwig to a school in Linz where Adolph Hitler was two forms ahead of him.² There


Ludwig grew fond of his Jewish heritage (both Karl and Fanny had Jewish forebearers, but studiously avoided contact with other Jews in Vienna). Ludwig’s grades, however, bore witness to no improvement in his scholarship. Karl Wittgenstein’s hoped that his sons would follow him in the business and also become patrons of the arts (the one son who joined the business and the other who undertook the proper training both committed suicide).

Finally, Karl was persuaded to send his youngest son to a technical school in Manchester where he did study mechanics and engineering. There, a teacher advised him to migrate to Cambridge where he might become acquainted with the work of Bertrand Russell, co-author of the Principia Mathematica. In Cambridge Wittgenstein the student came fully to life, attending the lectures of Russell and George Moore. He regularly visited the former’s rooms at night to discuss philosophy or just to pace back and forth in silence. On one of these occasions, Russell reports that he asked the pacing Wittgenstein, “Are you thinking about philosophy or your sins?” “Both!” responded Wittgenstein and went on pacing and grimacing.² Towards the end of this period, Ludwig Wittgenstein conceived the project of writing the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

When World War I broke out, Ludwig returned to Austria and joined the infantry, serving on the eastern front, including a stage at the front lines. Eventually, he was captured and spent the last two years of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy. During the war, both in the trenches and at the camp, Wittgenstein kept a series of notebooks that became the Tractatus. After his release from imprisonment, he showed the manuscript to Russell who arranged for its publication, first in Germany, later in England.

Military service constituted a crucial turning point in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s religious journey. At eighteen he tells us that conversations with his sister Gretl persuaded him to become an atheist. (Curiously, Gretl later became a devout Roman Catholic and influenced her sisters to follow her religious example.) During the war, on leave from

²In this portion of the essay, I am making use of Philip Shields, Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1993). I would, however, differ sharply from Shields on the relationship between the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the Philosophical Investigations.
his regiment, Ludwig purchased a copy of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*. Henceforward, he became known among his comrades as "the man with the gospels." Afterwards, he familiarized himself with the same author's *Twenty-Three Tales* in which he especially liked "Three Hermits". He considered the story the essence of the gospels and liked to quote from it, "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us."

After publication of the *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein considered the definitive philosophical book, he abandoned philosophy. He taught in two elementary schools in rural Austria, supervised the construction of a sister's house (still a landmark in Vienna), and worked as a gardener at a monastery. He contemplated for a time the life of a monk, but decided against that life. In the late twenties, he was engaged to be married, but broke off the engagement.

In 1930 he returned to Cambridge, was awarded a D.PHIL. for the *Tractatus*, and became a fellow at Trinity. Student notes from his initial lectures show that he was reconsidering the picture theory of the *Tractatus*. By the mid-thirties his change of mind was amply in evidence from the *Blue and Brown Books*. Wittgenstein had dictated these two books which were known by the color of their covers and were circulated around the university. These preliminary sketches came to full flower in the *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth, PI) which was published posthumously. It is along with his notes *On Certainty* (henceforth, OC) the pinnacle of his work.⁴

During the Second World War, Wittgenstein worked as an orderly in a London Hospital.⁵ He retired from his post at Cambridge in 1947 to concentrate full-time on the *Investigations*. In 1949 he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He spent much of the next two years jotting down the notes which became *On Certainty*. He died on April 28, 1951,

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⁴Wittgenstein "lectured" in his rooms at Trinity College. His students report that the sessions were incredibly tense and often punctuated by long periods of silence. Afterwards, Ludwig repaired to a cinema where he regularly sat in the first row in order to be totally absorbed by the movie. His favorite stars were Carmen Miranda and Betty Hutton. Cf. Georg H. von Wright's biographical sketch, esp p. 28, in Ludwig Wittgenstein: *A Memoir* by Norman Malcolm (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

surrounded by his doctor, three former students (Anscombe, Drury, and Smythies), and a Catholic priest, all of whom prayed for him. Drury had called the priest after Wittgenstein had lapsed into coma. Ludwig Wittgenstein received a Catholic burial at St. Giles in Cambridge. Drury justified his making the funeral arrangements since he remembered once asking Wittgenstein how he reacted to the fact that two of his students, Anscombe and Smythies, had converted to Catholicism while attending his lectures. Wittgenstein responded, “I don’t know whether they pray for me; I hope they do.”

As for Wittgenstein’s “deathbed conversion”, I would agree thoroughly with the assessment of Ray Monk:

The reconciliation with God that Wittgenstein sought was not that of being accepted back into the arms of the Catholic Church; it was a state of ethical seriousness and integrity that would survive the scrutiny of even that most stern of judges, his own conscience ‘the God who in my bosom dwells’.6

In a sense, Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later life (after reading Tolstoy and working at the monastery) aspired to the life of a secular monk. He apparently prayed and meditated. He frequently told his students that, if they would do good philosophy, purity (along with an ideal of celibacy if at all possible) was de rigeur.7 He was known to strive after honesty to a point where it almost became a fault. On one occasion he apologized elaborately for what involved a certain polishing of the truth.8

What Wittgenstein Said About Religion

The exemplar of religious belief for Ludwig Wittgenstein was Soren Kierkegaard. Like the great Danish writer, Wittgenstein considered such belief a passion. Religiousness involved a becoming. It required

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6 Monk, 580.
7 A number of years ago, a controversy swirled around a book by W.W. Bartley, *Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985) which advanced the thesis that Wittgenstein was an active and quite promiscuous homosexual. A judicial assessment of this issue is given by Monk in an appendix to his biography, 581-586.
turning one's life around. This turning comprised a personal struggle and hope for change in one's life. A Christian experiences his or herself in need of infinite help where the hoped-for salvation opens one's heart to God and the neighbor. 9

Faith is not an intellectual assent, but a personal and practical trust in and reliance on x. Ludwig Wittgenstein had no use for doctrines or speculative treatments of God's existence. "A religious man thinks himself wretched [Wittgenstein's emphasis]" (Culture & Value, henceforth CV, 45e). A religious person has managed to have his or her life changed in the face of suffering, death, and fear of death, 10 a consciousness of guilt, or despair over the failure in one's efforts to be a decent human being. These negative experiences educate us towards God (CV 86e).

Religious language gets its sense from practice (CV 85e). In religion we are seized hold of by a particular interpretation which leads to a way of life and provides criteria for assessing what is to be valued (CV 64e). Reason does have a role to play. In religious instruction this particular interpretation (or system of reference) is portrayed and made to appeal to our moral consciences. Through such instruction we see the hopelessness of our situation and recognize a means or rescue or redemption until, of our own accord, we rush to the system of reference and grasp it. We are not led to it by our instructor (CV 64e). 11

Ludwig Wittgenstein's jottings on "God" betray a Calvinistic (at least in the stereotypical sense) streak. God comes across as a fearful judge. Philip Shields has described Wittgenstein's God well:

In this Wittgenstein is in the spirit of religious thinkers like Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Kierkegaard. In Wittgenstein's writings on logic and grammar I will seek traces, not of the kind and gentle father, but of the Law-giver, and the terrible, demanding, and humanly incomprehensible God of Judaic

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10Wittgenstein's diaries show that he realized deeply how much his life was in danger when he served on the Eastern front. Cf. Ibid., 108-109.
11Nicholas Lash, who is heavily indebted to Wittgenstein, captures this aspect of his thought when he insists that Christianity is "a school for the production of persons." Cf. Nicholas Lash, Easter in Ordinary (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 148.
prophets—the God who judges individuals, cities and nations and then destroys or preserves them as he chooses accountable to no one. There are traces of the fearful judge in Wittgenstein’s sense of limitation and dependence before the inscrutable ways of logical grammar and in his sense of contingency and valuelessness of the world.\(^{12}\)

We might also note here that, in his jottings up to 1946, Ludwig Wittgenstein is preoccupied with predestination. In his Lecture on Ethics (1938), he emphasizes that God’s will is sovereign and inscrutable. We in turn are finite and depend utterly on the will of God. The good is what God commands. Wittgenstein once told Leszek Kolakowski that, if God willed the good because good is good in itself, God is, then, bound or obligated and thereby diminished.\(^{13}\)

The thesis of the Lectures on Ethics is that, if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. Fortunately for us, the divine will does not operate arbitrarily. It creates values which do not result from argumentation or permit objections. The good is simply there to be discovered. Rules of good behavior are like the rules of grammar. If we would speak or act, certain rules are thrust upon us. These rules depend upon communal agreement in forms of life—they are the way things are said or done.

An important passage on the meaning of God appears in CV 82e:

God’s essence is supposed to guarantee his existence—what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of some-thing.

Couldn’t one actually say equally well that the essence of colour guarantees its existence? As opposed, say, to white elephants. Because all that really means is: I cannot explain what ‘colour’ is, what the word ‘colour’ means, except with the help of a colour sample.

\(^{12}\)Philip Shields, 31. While I would argue that Shields does bring out a significant feature in Wittgenstein’s view of the divine, I have reservations about his treatment on two points. First, he provides a simplistic characterization of the Israelite prophets & the four Christian theologians in the passage quoted. Secondly, his overall assertion that there exists little difference between the Tractatus and the Philosophical Investigations needs much more nuance. For such a nuance, see the introduction to Garth Hallett’s A Companion to Wittgenstein’s “Philosophical Investigations” (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1977), 24-44.

\(^{13}\)Shields, 47.
So in this case there is no such thing as explaining ‘what it would be like if colours were to exist’.

And now we might say: There can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus—but not: ‘what it would be like if there were such a thing as God’. And to say this is to determine the concept ‘God’ more precisely. How are we taught the word ‘God’ (its use, that is)? I cannot give a full grammatical description of it. I can say a good deal about it and perhaps in time assemble a sort of collection of examples.

“Grammar” here is what Wittgenstein calls depth grammar: it tells us what can and cannot said in language, and thereby what kind of a thing is being talked about in language. Grammar provides conceptual analyses (more on this in the third part of this essay).

The identity of God’s essence with the divine existence alerts us to the fact that God names not just another thing (and points us in the direction of what Heidegger calls noething). It also serves as a caution that a complete grammatical description (or conceptual analysis) of God is not possible. At best we can assemble a set of reminders of who God is—we might point to Jahweh’s mighty deeds in the Old Testament or the parables of Jesus in the New. While Wittgenstein here is not breaking with the Christian theological tradition in his understanding of God, he is insisting that we know the above rules for talking about God from our use of religious language, and not by means of any metaphysical theory.

Furthermore, the word God is not so unique as we theologians frequently assert. God bears remarkable affinities with our use of color words. How do we know what red means? Red can be viewed as a complex term comprehending various shades such as maroon, rose, fuchsia, and what we called when I was young fire-engine red. If you ask me what I mean by the word, I would point to several covers of books in my office—color samples which reveal the breadth of reference for the meaning of the word. We get along quite well in everyday language with this concept of red which would never do if a painter were to describe what is on his palette. There exists, however, no ideal form of red like

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14This aspect of Heidegger’s thought has been superbly adumbrated by Bernhard Welte, “God in Heidegger’s Thought,” Philosophy Today (26: 1982), 85-100.
the standard metre in Paris. Both God and red depend on examples to learn their meaning and refer to nothing in particular.

Around the time Wittgenstein lectured on ethics (1938), he also gave a Lecture on Religious Belief.\(^\text{15}\) The lecture focuses on belief in the last judgment. It begins with a consideration of the difference between what a believer believes and what an atheist denies. His thesis is that a gulf obtains between the two. If the believer says, “God appeared among men and women as Jesus Christ,” the atheist may say, “I consider your statement nonsense,” but he or she does not contradict the believer in saying so. The former is stating a principle that guides and regulates his or her life. The principle enables the believer to forego certain pleasures and can even lead to risking one’s life. She or he might even conceive of one’s deeds as worthy of reward or punishment from the God of Jesus Christ. The atheist bases his or her life on an altogether different principle and sees no need for talk about God or Jesus Christ. The two walk different paths that do not necessarily intersect.

A person who believes in the last judgment is not making a prediction about a future event.\(^\text{16}\) If she or he were doing so, then “probably,” “maybe,” or “possibly” could be used as adverbs in “I believe in the last judgment.” The use of such adverbs makes no sense at all to the believer. Religious belief consists in a certain picture that is constantly in the foreground of the believer’s consciousness (like Polanyi’s tacit dimension). By contrast with normal standards of evidence (e.g. evidence which would satisfy the scholar or what counts for rendering an empirical proposition true), religious belief seeks confirmation in ways analogous to the ways which count for “I love you.” Thus, a person who says, “I believe in the last judgment” is speaking in the context of a personal relationship with God that touches the whole of one’s life. As a result, such a belief has this consequence: “My choices here and now affect my standing before God and are blameworthy or no!” Not even death can take away my responsibilities regarding certain duties.


\(^{16}\text{In this lecture, Wittgenstein provides no basis for what later came to be called “The Eschatological Verification” of Christian belief. Cf. Ian Crombie, “Arising from the University Discussion,” New Essays in Philosophical Theology, ed. A. Flew & A. MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955).}\)
Ludwig Wittgenstein recalls that he learned his picture of God in catechism, and that the picture had certain peculiarities. Unlike the picture of his aunt at home, he learned more readily what a picture of God did not mean: e.g. from “God’s eye sees everything,” it did not follow that God had eyebrows like his aunt. Additionally, he learned simultaneously who God was and that not believing in God was bad. No one, however, could have remonstrated with young Ludwig had he refused to believe in the existence of the Mad Hatter. Finally, evidence for God seemed to be beyond normal reasoning. No laboratory experiment proving God was proffered. And Paul claimed that belief in Jesus Christ was folly (I Cor 1, 20-25). Rather, certain experiences of terror counted for the existence of the deity.

In catechism class, young Ludwig learned what conclusions to draw from the picture. Religious instruction aims at the acquisition of a technique. Authentic Christians know what to say and do in situations construed as religious. The ways of speaking and acting taught through the catechism become exemplars which make possible further connections between religious words and deeds and unforeseen circumstances. In fact the knowing how to go on beyond what is explicitly written in the catechism indicates to the teacher that the child has mastered the religious technique. This technique becomes embodied in the conclusions the adult believer does and doesn’t draw.

In the Lecture on Religious Belief, Wittgenstein is quite candid that he speaks from an atheistic standpoint. Yet he elsewhere told a friend that the Our Father was the most extraordinary prayer ever written. He also confessed that he could not help but see everything from a religious point of view.\textsuperscript{17} Finally, he cautioned all of us who follow in his footsteps in doing theology that an honest religious thinker is like a tight-rope walker (CV 73e).

Theology as Therapy

According to Wittgenstein, philosophers were not involved in the search for universally valid principles. Their first task required them to clear up muddled thinking that was pervasive in much philosophical

\textsuperscript{17}High, 106 & 110; both remarks were made to M.C. Drury.
writing. He saw a great need to show that the disguised nonsense that paraded as deep truth was in fact patent nonsense. Thus, a theologian who would follow in his footsteps must set out to unmask the nonsense penned by fellow theologians.\textsuperscript{18} In this section, I will be guided, for the most part, by four fallacies, uncovered by Wittgenstein in his \textit{Philosophical Investigations} and adumbrated by Garth Hallett in his introduction to \textit{The Companion to Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations"}.\textsuperscript{19}

The first of these fallacies is called the SENSE fallacy: a meaningless word-group which superficially resembles meaningful sentences is taken to have a sense. Consider the following:

\begin{quote}
"The house is on the corner," and
"The house is on my shoulder."
\end{quote}

From a grammatical or syntactical perspective, the second sentence looks like the first; but it is certainly not a meaningful assertion unless the house is a toy house or the sentence is used as the punch line in a joke.

Now consider:

\begin{quote}
"My next door neighbor appeared at my door and punched me,"
and
"The Blessed Virgin appeared to me and punched me."
\end{quote}

The latter sentence would be recognized as nonsense, especially by those who insist adamantly on Marian appearances because the tradition of belief in appearances by members of the divine family and saints does not record any abusive physical assaults by Jesus, Mary, or other saints.

Now consider: "At the time of consecration, the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This change is called \textit{transubstantiation}.” The first sentence may strike us as paradoxical, but it is spoken by people of good sense. The issue to be considered here is whether the latter sentence is nonsensical.

\textsuperscript{18}Cf. the critique of David Tracy in John Downey, \textit{Beginning at the Beginning} (New York: University Press of America, 1986).
\textsuperscript{19}Hallett, 23-57, esp. 28-33.
Transubstantiation presumes that the bread and the wine are substances in the Aristotelian sense—a presumption that is frequently questioned today by philosophers in that tradition. Furthermore, the category of substance was developed by Aristotle in a world where physical reality was deemed to be in stasis. As a consequence, change needed to be explained. After relativity theory and quantum mechanics, our physical world would appear to be better described as being in a state of flux where elements of stability would require explanation. In this sense, transubstantiation which did make sense to the medieval theologians and councils that proffered it as an explanation of what transpired in the Eucharist has become not so much false, but nonsensical.

Let us look at an alternative proposal: “In the words of institution, the bread and wine are named the body and blood of Jesus Christ.” In technical language, the words of institution in the Eucharistic narrative are exercitives, i.e., words which bring a reality into existence. Other instances are christening services, marriage rites, and swearing-in ceremonies. Communities regularly demand the fulfillment of two conditions for a valid (language philosophers prefer to call them “happy”) exercitive. First, the words must follow a pre-existing verbal convention (in this case, “This is my body” and “This is my blood”). Additionally, the words need to be uttered by one designated by the community to do so (here, the priest-presider).

Some who hear this explanation are tempted to retort, “Then, you are saying that, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the bread and wine are only named the body and blood of Jesus Christ!” “Yes, if I am ‘only’ David Stagaman and you are ‘only’ (fill in the blank),” and “if your parents were only man and wife” and “if our public official are ‘only’ whatever offices they hold.” We use exercitives aplenty in our society, and numerous social realities (and the Eucharist is a social being) come into existence because persons and things are named such and such, and continue to be so named.

The second fallacy is the DESCRIPTIVE fallacy: an utterance which sounds like many a description or identification is mistakenly taken for one. Consider:

“The house is red” and “John is in pain,” and “I am in pain.”
The first sentence is a report and is validated through external evidence although often we take the word of the reporter: is he or she is considered trustworthy? We can always, however, look at the house and see whether it is red. The second sentence is a different kind of report. It can generally be supported by the fact that John is trustworthy and says so; but we might also attend to certain natural expressions such as anguish on his face or a bent-over posture. This kind of report is more complex since our knowledge of John through involvement in his life is most relevant. If we know him to be a trickster, a pathological liar, or a hypochondriac, we would probably not accept that he is actually in pain.

The third sentence is an avowal. Wittgenstein argues that, when a person avows something, we are inclined to think that he must be able to take a good look internally at his consciousness of the pain. Suffice it to say that Ludwig Wittgenstein has demonstrated the following: we learn avowals as verbal substitutes for the pain and other feelings we have and, when we utter such avowals, we do so against the background of certain appropriate natural expressions our listeners expect to observe and of the trustworthiness we have earned.20

In *The Logic of Self-Involvement*,21 Donald Evans uncovers an appositive example of the descriptive fallacy in theology. Normally, God’s creation of the world is compared to human making. Through a careful examination of the speech-acts used in the Biblical creation narratives, Evans points out that God commands the stars, the planets, vegetation, the animal world, and human beings into existence (Genesis 1). He further explores how the creation stories in Genesis are responded to elsewhere, primarily in various psalms. Divine creation, as a result, is not to be likened to building cars, tables, or computers, but to commands that evoke responses of obedience, praise, and self-esteem (we accept God’s verdict that all is created “good”) on the part of human creation.

The third of the fallacies is the REFERENCE fallacy: an expression which parallels referring ones is provided with a non-existent reference.

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20Wittgenstein’s treatment of pain language can be found as part of his famous inquiry into the possibility of a private language: *Philosophical Investigations*, ##243-315.

This fallacy takes three forms. First of all, a reference is provided by seizing upon some actual item of experience so that the item is supposed to be constantly correlated with the word (overlooking the before and after).

We hear the word discovery and think of Archimedes in his bath. Discoveries become flashes of insight. Close attendance, however, to the actual use of the word in our languaging shows that discovery encompasses a whole process: problematic data emerge and are acknowledged; a number of false and true attempts at a solution to the problem are tried; eventually, a flash of insight does occur, and pulls everything (or almost everything) together; the implications of the insight are explored and explicited; finally, a public discussion of the aforementioned activities, or at least their results, ensues. Flashes of insight are involved, but in themselves they may be flashes in the pan. They becomes “discoveries” only in the context of the entire process, both the before and the after.

In religion we are prone to associate the word conversion with some very specific experience: a person is impressed by the goodness of the religious people he or she knows; or the same person realizes that his or her life without God is meaningless and headed towards despair. Again such acts can be relevant in talking about a conversion, but they are taken up into a process which has antecedents and consequences. Converts are expected to show a profound dissatisfaction with their previous lives. Otherwise, they are not serious. And converts must pursue certain follow-ups. If a person told us that he or she was converted to our faith, but sought no instruction in that faith, never set foot in a church, or continued behavior alien to the moral code of our faith, we would consider such a person a hypocrite or fraud—and not genuinely converted.

An additional form of the reference fallacy happens when the inadequacy of observed phenomena leads us to suppose an observed reference—we hypostatize a thought or feeling as the referent. A grand idea like “Manifest Destiny” comes to be associated with a wagon train wending its way westward or certain behaviors which display the hubris of American white males. Grand ideas are suitably used to describe certain historical phenomena, but they are inherently vague and need no reference to be used intelligently.
Likewise some people assert, "I am saved in Jesus Christ", and think the words refer to going forward in a revival tent or feelings of elation and joy which can be summoned forth when we declare that we are saved. Actually, "I am saved in Jesus Christ" is a grand idea without a specific reference. It says rather how I view the whole of my existence: as a sinner utterly unable to redeem myself, but now convinced that I have become a son or daughter of God through the redemptive work of my brother Jesus. I am making an existential assertion. Such assertions refer to nothing in particular.

Finally, we can etherealize a referent by projection when no actual or even supposed referent is given. Philosophical treatments of the human soul can be so construed if we think of soul as a ghost in a machine or as a substratum which undergirds our thinking and willing. When we use the word soul, we should reflect along the lines of this analogy: "That music has soul." Soul (or talk of soul) is our way of claiming that human behavior is irreducible to the way animals or plants act and has humane purposes. Our behavior displays an integration which includes thinking and willing, but also eating and walking. The etherealizing of soul as a substratum blinds us to the fact that all human behavior is embodied. We readily recognize this fact when our thinking is affected by the flu or our thinking and willing lie dormant when we are asleep. But we see these limitations as exceptions and not the rule of our human lives. Soul says how we exist, not something disembodied about our human nature.\(^{22}\)

Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Religious Belief" provide us with another example of this kind of fallacy. When we say, "I believe in the last judgment," we are not referring to a future gathering of all humanity before God, but expressing a profound conviction that each and every moral decision we make determines our relationship with God. The imagining of the "great round-up at the end" does no harm if we keep in mind its mythological character. Myths emerge from the depths of our imaginations and express profound human truths. As a result, a picture of the last judgment might motivate us to be kind and generous towards

\(^{22}\)Wittgenstein's treatment of belief in the soul is found in the *Philosophical Investigations*, II, 178. It does follow from his treatment that talk of the immortality of the soul is misguided. Theological considerations of the resurrection of the whole person are not precluded.
others. Nonetheless, the assertion, "God will judge the living and the
dead," refers to no future event, but tells us how our present actions situ-
ate us before God.

The fourth fallacy is the ESSENCE fallacy: the same term used on
different occasions is mistakenly thought to pick out the same essence
each time. Words like table, chair, etc. are deemed to be like proper
names which denote high specificity each time they are used. In ordi-
nary language, however, words are normally open-ended and can pos-
sess a certain degree of ambiguity. What does table say? We use this word
for kitchen tables which are square and banquet tables which are rect-
angular or circular; for coffee tables and time-tables; and for certain
objets d’art... If we attempt to find certain elements that are present in
all the usages of table in ordinary language, the essence in question van-
ishes into nothingness. Univocality, we need to understand, where the
same word has an identical meaning in all its instances, is a violence
done to ordinary language, usually for scientific or technical purposes.
Scientists need to define their terms with precision if they are to exer-
cise their craft. But, in our everyday language, we get along quite well
with words whose meaning has a certain playfulness to it.

In theology, when we ask, "Who is Jesus Christ?", "What is sanctity?", or
"What is the church?", our inquiries are easily misled because of the
essence fallacy. We suppose that our examinations and explications will
uncover one central factor or set of elements that reveal the essence at
the end of our quest. We sense the problematic character of such
searches when we review our historical heritage. What the fathers of the
church wrote on christology, spirituality, or ecclesiology, what we find
in medieval treatises on these topics, and how our modern treatments
aver do not readily coalesce into any single set of themes. Generally
speaking the search for the essential features in the history of theology
forces us to settle for a common core that is incredibly abstract and to
ignore the differences from that core which may have struck us as highly
enlightening when reading a particular theologian.

Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested an alternative reading of the phe-
nomena. He recommended the metaphor of family resemblances as a
means of interrelating such phenomena. I resemble my father more than

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I do my mother, and my sister more than my brother. Nevertheless I do
bear some resemblance to my mother and brother. Most important
there exists no Stagamanness that captures what the five of us look like.
We are, however, all Stagamans—linked by physical similarities where
each member of the family bears a resemblance to each of the other
four—but not in any uniform fashion.

Family-resemblances might prove useful in the comparative study
of religions. Too often experts in this field set out in search of an es-
scence, and assert that all religions involve the notion of an absolute. For
Christians, an absolute, which is not personal, is no absolute at all. In
our tradition, the non-personal is less than the personal and could not
be a perfection of any kind. Thus, a Christian would rightly object to
talk about absoluteness as the essence of religions if the absolute could
be not personal.

Family resemblances would lead us to think about the interrela-
ships among world religions in the following manner:24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, we intelligently use the word religion for the above five, but their
interrelationships are not reducible to a common core. Rather, these
religions belong to a family of human ways of speaking and behaving.

Theology as Grammar (PI 373)

Not all of Wittgenstein’s work was critical or therapeutic. He recom-
manded a new way of doing conceptual analysis: perspicuous represen-

24The religions of the world would be listed in the left-hand columns and their
characteristics represented by the letters; a could stand for monotheism; since Chris-
tianity espouses a trinitarian monotheism, a’ might be more appropriate. What is im-
portant is that family resemblances allows us to compare religions according to not
only what they have in common but also how they differ. For the above diagram, I am
indebted to James Kraft, a graduate theological union student who is using family re-
semblances in his doctoral dissertation to explore relations among world religions.
tation (PI 122). Perspicuous representation involves a careful examination of concrete cases, especially the intermediate cases, toward an a priori (depth grammar) which is paradoxically accessible only through the a posteriori. Depth grammar tells us what can and cannot be said in language. It seeks not an order that holds before all contingent states of affairs, but an analysis that concentrates on the intermediate cases. While, in what follows, I intend to do what is recognizably conceptual analysis, it is important to note that Wittgenstein also advised us to settle for a good epigram or apt metaphor in place of such analysis.

Anthony Thiselton has done a Wittgensteinian analysis of certain scriptural texts; he develops three intriguing classes of New Testament assertions.²⁵

Examples of the first are:

But if by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works—otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Rom 11, 6);

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? (Rom 8, 34);

But if I do not know the meaning of language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker & the speaker a foreigner to me (I Cor 14, 11).

These utterances Thiselton contends are analytic, i.e., they do not provide information, but definitions. They may expand our horizons (or our understanding of an already given horizon), but they do so by being self-evident (at least to the Apostle Paul and his readers).

Examples of the second class are:

By no means! Let God be true though every man be false, as it is written, 'That thou mayest be justified in words, and prevail when thou art judged...That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? By no means! For then how could God judge the world? (Rom 3, 4, 5b, 6 & 9);

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8, 7-8).

Thiselton argues that these two passages express attitudes of a particular (in this case, Christian) tradition such that the opposite is inconceivable within that tradition. In the first example, it doesn’t make sense that an unjust or sinful deity could judge the world; so the initial reaction originates in a fleshly, i.e. opposed to God’s rule, conviction. Thiselton observes that utterances of the second class are common in the New Testament where the setting is dialogue and the argument moves toward an open-ended rational appeal. Such appeals presuppose a taken-for-granted religious or ethical understanding.

Examples of the third class are:

For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly nor is true circumcision something outwardly and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His promises are not from men but from God (Rom 2, 28-29);

He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who have righteousness reckoned to them and likewise the father of the circumcised, but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Rom 4, 11-12).

According to Thiselton the above two passages are linguistic paradigms which guide elucidation and application. The use of language here affects how the reader sees things. The language creates a proper view of the matters in question (who is a true Jew? who are the authentic heirs of Abraham?). Thiselton adds an important caution about class three assertions. They possess a built-in ambiguity: they can lead us to genuine religious insight or seduce us into error and confusion. The above passages from Romans can be used to lead Christians to see themselves as brothers and sisters of the Jews whose heritage is now shared with the baptized or to provide justifications for anti-Semitism.

Depth grammar is learned as we learn our native languages. For example, when we learn to make promises, we master some significant rules for promising: that we can’t promise anything in the past, or something that will happen in the normal course of events (e.g., that the sun
will rise tomorrow); the content of our promises can't be something that is harmful to their recipients even if we use the word promise in e.g. "I promise you that you will pay for this!" which is a threat and not a promise; we also learn that sincerity is crucial to whether our promises are taken seriously.26

Depth grammar can change over time. In modern societies swearing an oath today usually includes a proviso whereby the swearer can be excused from further carrying out of the oath. When Richard Nixon resigned in August of 1974, no one objected that, in January of 1972, he had taken an oath to be President of the United States, presumably for four years. In ancient societies such provisos regarding oaths did not always obtain. Consider the case of the aged Isaac who was duped into giving his paternal blessing to the younger Jacob instead of the older Esau who rightly expected to receive his father's blessing. The blessing could not be taken back, not because some magical or supernatural power was involved, but because no convention existed at the time for rendering a mistaken blessing or oath null and void (Gen 27, 1-40).27

People say things like "It was simply beyond words" or "I can't really tell you what it was like!" They utter such sentences in good and bad times. What most of us don't realize when we utter these sentences is that speaking about the ineffable follows deep grammatical rules:

(1) The events in question are out of the ordinary where the familiar is broken or even shattered. They are never trivial, everyday occurrences with taken-for-granted status. If someone was watching the weekly garbage collection and said "It was an experience beyond words," you would wonder what the catch was or when the punch line in the joke was coming. You would know at once that the sentence was not speech about the ineffable.

(2) Ordinarily, the ineffable has already occurred and the past tense of the verb is apposite. Occasionally present tenses are used, but these uses represent the effect of the event as historically present.

(3) The experiences of the ineffable were all-consuming at the time, and our attention focuses on the subject matter, and not our response. The sentences above are often accompanied by other sentences such as


"I was drawn out of myself," "Time went by in an instant," "Time came to a stop," or "Suddenly, what I was planning to do seemed so frivolous."

(4) The experience includes a tacit response which is embodied with a high correlate of affective energy (great joy, high anxiety, paralyzing fear, profound sadness, etc.).

(5) The subject matter properly evokes a response of silence or awe where talk can appear as senseless chatter.

(6) This silence or awe does look for acknowledgement and an empathetic response from one's fellows.

(7) The subject matter is appropriately described in metaphors or special names (The riot at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 is variously remembered as the "battle of the Hilton" or a "police riot"; conservatives referred to the inaugural of Ronald Reagan as "morning in America").

People also say things like "I don't know whether I can put into words what I want to say" or "I don't know quite how to say this." Again, being tongue-tied has its rules.

(1) The speaker is concerned over a genuine puzzle, not something obvious to all. We don't utter such sentences about getting out of bed in the morning or brushing our teeth.

(2) Although we say we can't put it into words, we invariably try to do so, and the attempt to say something has the character of hesitancy and fumbling.

(3) If someone else puts what we want to say into words, we recognize instantly the sought-after expression and respond "You took the words right out of my mouth."

(4) When we are still fumbling in speech, we expect our hearers, especially if they are family or friends, to listen patiently.

(5) When we need to speak, we focus on our incapacity and not on the subject matter. As speakers, we know both the severity of our present limited capability and the sense of wholeness towards which we aspire linguistically. The correct expression brings relief and a sense of genuine achievement.

(6) This correct expression, whether a welcome or unpleasant truth, ought to come to speech. We feel a deep longing for a future speech-event.
Speaking of the ineffable and the need to speak follow rules which determine how we speak religiously. When we speak of the ineffability of “God”, we mean that “God” is quite out of the ordinary, whose presence is all absorbing and evokes responses of silence/awe in a community of friends which speaks in metaphors and special names, and who is known through his mighty deeds in the past. To speak of “God in Jesus Christ” is to speak of ourselves as belonging to a community of sinners confronted with our own powerlessness, but recognizing Jesus Christ as the wholeness to which we aspire whose full revelation has an eschatological character. The Word of God becomes human words by following the depth grammar of human talk of the ineffable and of the necessity to speak.

A key conceptual tool in the later works of Wittgenstein is language-games. While there is some justification in his work for speaking about the language game of religion, generally speaking the term is restricted to specific ways of speaking (the technical term is speech-acts) like promising, speaking of the ineffable, and longing to speak. Likewise another crucial term forms of life refers to specific behaviors such as singing hymns, genuflecting, kneeling or standing during worship, etc. It is not terribly helpful to speak of worship as a form of life.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in using the terms language games and forms of life, aimed at breaking down our penchant for generality in conceptual analysis. He strove to attend to our actual behavior in a very concrete manner. What do people say or do in particular circumstances? What do they do, and what are the appropriate contexts for doing so?

IV. Was Ludwig Wittgenstein a relativist? Does his position on human certitude lead inevitably to what has been called “Wittgensteinian Fideism”?

Ludwig Wittgenstein has sometimes been accused of relativism. Philosophers, who are critical of him, become perplexed when they read that he insisted that blunders are confined to a particular language-game (hence, Winch’s insistence that calling the game itself a blunder is unwarranted) plus his contention that all arguments are based on part-

to-part analogies, i.e., no human being ever attains a transcendental vantage point from which s/he can pronounce definitively on the words and acts of others. In On Certainty, Wittgenstein maintains that all arguments come to an end, and that they end not in the indubitable, but in the undoubted (OC 34e). The undoubted are ways in which we act and which ground the beliefs to which we hold firm (OC 10). This anti-foundationalism has stimulated the charge that Wittgenstein is a relativist.

Defending Ludwig Wittgenstein against this charge turns on a two-fold rejoinder. While we would concede that he clearly repudiates any indubitable standard, whether it be the version of René Descartes or that of George Moore, which founds all thinking, this concession doesn’t lead to relativism for Wittgenstein in On Certainty insists that such standards simply don’t exist if we examine how human beings go about their lives. When they frame reasonable doubts, they do so on the basis of certain truths which are held firmly and ultimately depend on further truths that are grounded in forms of life (or the ways in which we all act).

Secondly and similarly, according Wittgenstein, the philosophical quest for absolute certitude is “language gone on holiday.” We might paraphrase him in the following way: “In the Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty, I have described how people actually speak, act, think, will, intend, etc. In these everyday actions, they get along quite nicely without the foundations modern philosophy has prescribed for them. In describing how people genuinely speak and act, I have discovered that human reasoning rests on the undoubted, not the indubitable, and that people do not say or do everything and anything. Thus, neither they nor I are relativists.”

A person who says, “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,” is uttering a conviction that drives that person’s life—a life in which it makes sense to speak and act religiously. In itself the conviction admits of no further grounding. If challenged the person might point to the ways in which the gospels enlighten his or her own personal story, and to a community of which the person is a member where the same assertion is held in common. These realities, however, are not above questioning, especially for someone who sees no need for salvation, lacks any sense of sin in his/her life, and doesn’t like the church in question. Believers do give reasons for their beliefs, but these reasons do not exist indepen-
dently of the believers' lives. The conviction, the reasons, and the actions which ground the reasons enable believers to make sense of their lives in a certain way. Religious convictions are not irrationally held—nor are they just probable. When we make up our minds to live one way and not another, we have reasons for our decisions which make sense, but are not beyond doubt. To assert that we must have the same certainty about how we will work out our identities and our destinies as we have when we recite the multiplication tables is itself an unreasonable demand.

Ludwig Wittgenstein delighted in saying that religion was madness and insisting on the ultimate groundlessness of all beliefs, religious or secular. The groundlessness, in question, refers to the fact that beliefs can only appeal to reasons that eventually lead us to the assertion: "This is the way I live my life, and this life makes sense to me." When he says that religion is madness, he wants to direct our attention to the single-mindedness of religious believers who may be perplexed by certain events that don't quite fit the picture, but are not immediately tempted to throw over their faith because of a few counter-evidences (CV 64e).

Fideism generally speaking is the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith itself rather than on reasoning or evidence. In its extreme form, fideism is a blind faith which sees itself as contrary to reason. While Wittgenstein's remark that religion is madness might fit here, the fideism with which he is charged speaks rather to a modified form of fideism which admits that reason plays a role in belief, but insists that a complete and absolute certitude in faith pre-exists any rational scrutiny of that faith. Since Wittgenstein denied the existence of any kind of absolute certitude, he clearly is not a fideist in this modified sense.30

More, obviously, needs to be said. Wittgenstein was convinced that religious faith was, first and foremost, an affair of the heart and did not result from speculative reasoning. He said that we are saved flesh and blood, and not as abstract minds (CV 33e). Religious belief often requires certain changes in our attitudes and leads to our living accord-

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30This discussion of fideism depends on the research of Andrew Maddox, a student in the graduate theological union doctoral program.
ing to definite patterns (CV 32e). "Religion says, Do this; Think like that!" (CV 29e). In other words, religion requires that we master a set of language-games and adopt appropriate behaviors. The language-games enable us to think and reason in patterns which address serious problems and paradoxes of human living. The behaviors align us with a community for whom the language-games make sense and the ways of behaving are deemed typical of that community. If one would be a follower of Jesus Christ, one is usually expected to attend church on Sunday, do charitable deeds, act justly and fairly in business transactions, remain faithful in marriage, etc. And these behaviors give rise to and are confirmed by the hymns we sing, the prayers we say, the confessions we proclaim (e.g., being a sinner, but saved in Jesus Christ), and the creeds we recite. These things we do in language have a performative character: they connect us to the behaviors and bring them into being. Following Jesus Christ, then, includes a complex array of language-games and multiple behaviors which characterize a community called church. They are the givens of being a Christian. And, while these givens are not beyond all questioning, they ground a whole way of life. As such, these givens cannot be broken down into a series of individual propositions whose truth is, then, assessed individually; rather they hang together like the strands that make up a rope. In short, the decision to speak and act religiously has an all-or-nothing character. We must choose the whole, and not the bits and pieces that make up being religious (OC 229).

Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that the human person is a ceremonial being. He meant that humans depend on linguistic and behavioral rituals in order to live well. These rituals come to have a taken-for-granted status and, then, provide the norms to which we appeal to justify our speech as intelligent and our actions as right. These norms are not themselves normed. It is our trust in the everyday rituals that get us through our days which provides meaning and substance to our lives. Thus, trust or belief in these rituals enables us to know what is intelligent and what is right. "Faith seeking understanding" is a motto for secular as well as theological inquiry. And religion is not a reality

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which bears no resemblance to our ordinary ways of speaking and acting.

V. How radical is the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein?

In an article Vernon Bourke wrote several years ago on the concept of virtue in Thomas Aquinas, Bourke pointed out that, in order to explain virtue, Aquinas has to resort to potentia activa (active potency). In doing so, he created an intermediary between actus (act) and potentia (potency). Aquinas readily recognized that virtues, once formed, increase the likelihood that we will act in certain ways (hence, active), but that virtues are capacities to act, not actions themselves (hence, potency). He needed the concept to explain the phenomena with which he was dealing; but potentia activa introduces a paradoxical concept into his metaphysics.  

In Truth and Method, Hans Georg Gadamer’s retrieval of Aristotle’s phronesis (prudence) provides the lynchpin for his theory of hermeneutics. Gadamer notes how phronesis obeys a strange set of rules in its development. In fact one might say that the concept breaks the rules we would ordinarily expect to find in Aristotle’s philosophy.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s genius is to make virtue a central concept in his philosophical inquiry. The habituated skills we display in speech and action enable us to grasp the interrelationship among self, the world, and human community. One becomes a self and enters into the world by learning the communally shared and agreed-upon ways of talking and doing which norm what we consider true and good.

Ludwig, the philosopher, believed profoundly in the sinfulness of our human condition and in how our evil ways of speaking and acting had infected the doing of philosophy. As a result, philosophy began in therapy. He also told a friend that his problems with religion were not with the conviction that we all needed redemption, but with the

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doctrine of creation. He knew that he needed what only a god could provide; but a doctrine of creation divorced from the doctrine of redemption he could not abide. It created a dualism which made no sense to him.  

The movement from the Tractatus to the Investigations has been well described as his abandoning the position of a godlike observer who intervenes in the world in an almost magical manner to his embracing the vantage point of one who participates in the world by belonging to a community where all arrives as a grace. His last words were “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.”

Abbreviations

CV – Culture and Value
PI – Philosophical Investigation
OC – On Certainty

36James Edwards, Ethics Without Philosophy, 252-255.