Picturing God: Wittgenstein on Religion, Science and Superstition

By Jonathan Weinberg

I HAVE FOUND IT VERY USEFUL IN STUDYING THE LATER philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to place the *Philosophical Investigations* in the context of challenging logical positivism. Placing it in such a context, we might easily draw two conclusions about necessity and nonsense opposite from those Rudolf Carnap might have drawn.

First, instead of logic’s inviolability, we might conclude that logic and mathematics are language-games on the same footing as any other— that is, no footing at all. We all act in a certain way in our counting, adding, etc., and this is no more than a raw empirical fact, as Michael Dummett claims concerning Wittgenstein’s supposed “full-blooded conventionalism”: “That a given statement is necessary consists always in our having expressly decided to treat that very statement as unassailable.”¹

Second, instead of all religious talk being *Unsinn*, as most logical positivists thought, religious language-games become unassailable as examples of other “forms of life.” Religious talk will be criticized only from outside of that religion, where it cannot be understood, and therefore cannot be criticized. As Peter Winch observes, our criteria for “rationality” may simply not count as reasons to the religious, and therefore any argument that can be run by the non-believer to show the believer to be unreasonable can just as well be run the other way around.²

Thus we see how science and religion, held by many members of the Vienna Circle to be as qualitatively different as statements of factual truth and primal grunts, can be taken to be essentially no different from one another under this reading of Wittgenstein. At the same time, this reading makes “empirical” facts in no way privileged over religious discourse, since science can in no way step outside itself, look at the world sideways on, and decide what is Absolute Truth. I believe this stance to be incorrect, both as a reading of Wittgenstein and philosophi-

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cally in general. I shall demonstrate that Wittgenstein does not hold that all language games are created equal, by illustrating how religion differs from science and mathematics without becoming unassailable at all points. We need not give up reason simply because we cannot give it other reasons; just because someone is doing something different with the language does not mean it is entirely all right for him to do so.

Religion is not Science

SINCE THE PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS NEVER DISCUSSES religion explicitly (God appears occasionally primarily to represent some omniscient observer of ultimate reality invoked by the "voice of temptation"), we must turn to the lectures on religious belief. The problem of incomparability of science and religion is put before us most acutely by the following passage:

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

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

What we call believing in a Judgement Day or not believing in a Judgement Day — the expression of belief may play an absolutely minor role.

If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgement Day, in the sense in which religious people have a belief in it, I wouldn't say: "No. I don't believe there will be such a thing." It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this.

And then I give the explanation: "I don't believe in...", but then the religious person never believes what I describe.

I can't say. I can't contradict the person.3

It is this inability of the non-believer to contradict the believer that makes it seem that these different systems are incomparable. They are using different languages; "not agreement in opinions but in forms of life" (§241)4 might be the slogan of such "incommensurabilists." To use Wittgenstein's analogy of games, it is as though the atheist tries to beat the theist at bridge by saying she has a full house.

The confusion arises from the use of pictures which permeate religious discourse. Concrete, physicalistic depictions, either in language or actually as pictures, play a vital role in all religions; Wittgenstein discusses Michelangelo's painting of God creating Adam, for example.5 The logical positivist might attempt a variety of interpretations of the picture: he can treat it as an intended snapshot, saying that this is what God looked like, and that is what Adam looked like; or he can just regard the whole thing as a botched metaphor which attempts to express something non-empirical which, for that reason, is incoherent; or he can take it as a purely emotive expression, meaning little more than "Wow! God!"
Wittgenstein, of course, uses none of these interpretations. The first two make the essential mistake of thinking that language (here, including paintings) has one purpose and one alone: to make empirical claims. Samples are named, and arranged in a certain way, à la *Tractatus* and the Augustinian picture of language. But just because a picture or sentence looks like a correspondingly empirical one (the snapshot interpretation), does not mean that some such "proposition" is being "asserted." What my "looks" intends to capture is one of Wittgenstein's "family resemblances" between uses of language. And as he observes, "the picture has to be used in an entirely different way [than, for example, a picture of an actual historical event] if we are to call the man in that queer blanket 'God', and so on." Winch observes correctly that "what makes the picture a religious picture is not its pictorial relationship to some event." The discussion of private language applies to this discussion: rewriting §293 slightly, we see that "if we construe the grammar of the expression of religion on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant." If the logical positivist accept only one picture of how language works, then we must take all religious utterances to be a pseudo-scientific "such-and-such is the case" or nonsense. But God is relevant to a theist just as pain is to anyone not under heavy anaesthesia. A picture does not have to designate *per se*, but rather it can show the role that someone's life. This brings us to the emotivist interpretation: he or she cashes out the above objection by saying that the picture says "Gee, God's important to me," or "I like God." Wittgenstein disallows this option, too; he explains that "the whole weight may be in the picture." Winch, in the same article cited above, stresses that pictures are in no sense reducible to other expressions, such as those I just listed, for such pictures are "essential to the way we represent things to ourselves" — he cites Wittgenstein's remark in §427 that our expression of seeing into someone's head is a picture which "should be taken seriously. We should really like to see into his head... [for it is this picture] which expresses the psychical." On the subject of religious pictures, Wittgenstein asserts that someone using a picture "couldn't just as well have said something else. If he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say.... Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use?" We can see why we cannot simply dismiss all religious language as ridiculous, nonsensical, or non-cognitive. Language is too complex, works in too many ways, for as simple a model as that of the positivists to capture all its uses. Our language must often rely on physical imagery — pictures — to express itself fully. It is not always fruitful to ask, "What do these words denote?", for in cases such as Michelangelo's painting, denotation is not at issue. This is true of much of our ordinary language, such as language about sensation, with
which the private language argument concerns itself. Nor will a less pictorial paraphrase necessarily suffice.

What Religion Is

The best question to ask is, "How does this sentence/picture/gesture fit into a person's life? How is it used?" The religious discourse in the examples cited above is used in a different way than scientific, propositional discourse, and as such, they cannot contradict one another: "in a religious discourse we use such expressions as: 'I believe such-and-such will happen,' and use them differently from the way in which we use them in science." The different use religion and science have is shown in what Wittgenstein calls the former's unshakeability. This aspect of religious belief will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating ... [the believer's] whole life. This is a much stronger fact — foregoing pleasures, always appealing to this picture. This in one sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs, because the man takes risks on account of it, which he would not do on things that are far better established for him; although he distinguishes between things well-established and not well-established.

Things that are well-established might be, for example, that dogs have existed, that that is a chair — very basic empirical claims. These are the sorts of things which can be shown "by appeal to ordinary grounds." Religious pictures can also resemble historical ones, e.g., the Gospels. But as Wittgenstein goes on to note, Christianity "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" [my emphasis]. For empirical facts are always matters of greater or lesser probability, and enter into our lives as such — no empirical fact or even set of facts, especially of a highly theoretical nature, is such that we would treat it in this manner. A quote in Culture and Value, from approximately a year before the lectures on religious belief, after a good portion of the Investigations had been written, sums up this difference beautifully:

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!

I should now like to present the negative part of my argument, that Wittgenstein does disallow certain "religious" discourse and label some of it as unreasonable. Up to now I have only explained how Wittgenstein does not allow the Sciencist (i.e. a proponent of Scientism, as opposed to a non-philosophical scientist) to disallow religious discourse, because such discourse cannot
properly contradict each other. Hence there is no "paradox," no conflict between the Christian's religious picture of a given story and a historian's empirical picture of the same story. A Christian historian may even make a twofold use of the same narrative; it may enter his life on both the fundamental and surface levels. But the problem is that what appears to be religious language — in just the same way described above that religious language may look like an empirical proposition — may actually be what Wittgenstein calls "superstition." For this "quite different place" in our lives that allows Wittgenstein to prevent scientific (and, moreover, Scientistic) challenges to religious beliefs is precisely where some individuals do not place these beliefs.

When Religion is not Religion

Wittgenstein gives the example of a father O'Hara, who is "ludicrous" in his "making [Christian belief] appear to be reasonable."15 "Reasons," for Wittgenstein, are the very ordinary sorts of things we give to establish that, for example, Napoleon lived at such-and-such a time. They exist, as I noted above, closer to the surface of our lives. What we cite evidence for — what we feel a need to cite evidence for — we do not organize our lives around. In this way, religious belief is not "reasonable" — but in the same way, neither is our belief that others are not automata, or that our two hands exist, or that our words have meaning, "reasonable" beliefs. All such "beliefs" are beyond reasons, and therefore beyond reason. They are central, irreversible beliefs; we build our lives on them, and take nothing as a disproof of their validity. Proper religious belief is in just this category.

For example, take Wittgenstein's rebuke of O'Hara: Wittgenstein finds him ridiculous, not because O'Hara's arguments are "based on insufficient evidence.... [He] would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons." Precisely this ridicule, this reduction to absurdity, can be applied to those who take sense-data as a proof of the outside world's existence, who take the technique for finding a prime number larger than any number given as a proof that numbers themselves exist, who take any form of human behavior as a proof for their having souls. They have mistaken such affairs for empirical propositions of some bizarre sort.

Thus, such superstition is rightly labeled by Wittgenstein as "a sort of false science."16 In the case in question, religious belief, the pseudo-"believer" has taken pictures meant to organize one's life as, in my earlier example, a form of photograph meant to depict an event — exactly the logical positivist's mistake described above. And it is precisely the unshakeable, the non-reasonable, non-empirical quality of religious pictures that makes them unassailable by the positivists, which also makes miracles more or less irrelevant to belief. If observation cannot disprove belief or render it nonsensical, nor can it prove it or give it sense. Under "normal circumstances," Wittgenstein would treat a miracle such as a bleeding statue "just as [he] would treat an experiment in a laboratory which [he] thought badly executed."17 If you want to allow empirical criteria, Wittgenstein is saying, then you must allow me to use my criteria for poor
empirical data! For the same reason, dreams are not seen as evidence in any manner, not even slender; after all, would we consider it proper for a physicist to record a dream about a particle in his lab notebook?

We can conclude, then, that there is nothing in a given picture or language game which in itself is religious or superstitious. As Hilary Putnam writes, comparing Wittgenstein to Kierkegaard,

religious discourse can be understood in any depth only by understanding the form of life to which it belongs. What characterizes that form of life is not the expression of belief that accompanies it, but a way — a way that includes words and pictures, but is far from consisting in words and pictures — of living one’s life, of regulating all of one’s decisions.... A person may think and say all the right words and be living a thoroughly non-religious life.... A person may think he or she is worshipping God and really be worshipping an idol.19

A picture can suggest a certain use, but that is no guarantee that it will be used in that way (cf. §139). Two people may make the same assertions and use the same language, refer to the same pictures, but without observing further what they consider reasons or proofs, we cannot tell how it enters their lives. And it is only at the point of what role a given picture or language-game plays in the person’s life that it becomes (or fails to become) religious. So Wittgenstein denies that all “religion-talk” is protected by its religiousness, for much that seems religious is no more than bad science — wretched science, in fact, even ridiculous.

When We Can’t Tell

It is important here, now that I have brought up idols, to distinguish what appears as a religious belief but turns out to be mere superstition in our society and similar situations in other, substantially alien settings. Wittgenstein primarily discusses members of his own society, particularly in relation to Christianity. For what could count as empirical evidence, what we all count as miraculous, is parasitic (to use Winch’s term)20 on the scientific notion of rationality; the miraculous is defined as that which stands outside of natural science, and as such one cannot account for the miraculous “on its own terms.” Wittgenstein’s rejection of miracles as a form of empirical evidence rests on the fact that the form of rationality which makes sense of the very concept of “empirical evidence” has no room for miracles. Another example of such mis-thinking is rationalization of how God could judge humanity: “If he really takes strength of temptation and the frailty of nature into account, whom can he condemn? But otherwise the resultant of these two forces is simply the end for which man was predestined. In that case he was created so that the interplay of forces would make him either conquer or succumb. And that is not a religious idea at all, but more like a scientific hypothesis.”21 The scientific concept of determinism, as a resolution of forces and not the will of God, makes such judgement difficult to understand, since the standard criteria for having an excuse would cover all circumstances. It is because this picture of judgement creates such difficulties that Wittgenstein
concludes his remark by stating that “if you want to stay within the religious sphere you must struggle.” You must struggle with all the existing and everyday pictures that our society uses, and with the temptation to understand (as, for example, the logical positivist does) your religious pictures in the same manner as ordinary ones.

But for other societies the case is more shaky. The only reference in Wittgenstein that can be taken to apply is the following passage:

We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious.... They have sentences, and there are also religious sentences.

These statements would not just differ in what they are about. Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs, and there can easily be imagined transitions where we wouldn’t know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs. You may say they reason wrongly.

In certain cases you would say they reason wrongly, meaning they contradict us. In other cases you would say they don’t reason at all, or “It is an entirely different kind of reasoning.” The first, you would say in the case in which they reason in a similar way to us, and make something corresponding to our blunders....

If they do something very like one of our blunders, I would say, I don’t know. It depends on the further surroundings of it.22

The first case, in which we encounter people who can contradict us, who use a reason similar to ours, would be as though we came to some island culture that had been settled by colonists from our own; they resemble us closely enough, they are closely enough “attuned” to us that we can say that they share our criteria for reasons and therefore for blunders. We are in a position, after examining the “further surroundings” of their language games and determining that they are ours as well, to make the distinction between religion and superstition. We can say here that they reason wrongly because they share in the same notion of reasoning incorrectly. (Perhaps the island we landed on was Great Britain, and the man we met, the much-maligned Father O’Hara.)

But the island’s inhabitants may be different from us, even radically so. Winch, in Ethics and Action discusses the example of the Azande tribe in Africa. The Zande use such notions (labeled thus by anthropologists) as witchcraft, magic and oracles in ways very different from ours. It is not as though these phenomena operate outside of science in the sense that magic in our society always contradicts science, and as such can be rejected as unreasonable. But the Zande organize their lives around the notion of witchcraft, and they do “in fact conduct their affairs to their own satisfaction in this way [i.e. with oracles], which reveal the presence of witchcraft and are at a loss when forced to abandon the practice.”23 This level of commitment indicates the extent to which this practice forms a self-sufficient basis for the lives of the Zande.

Just as we have criteria for correctly- and poorly- run experiments, the Zande have their own; just as a physicist may have a section in a paper explaining an odd piece of data, the Zande can account for poor results with all sorts
of explanations, "whose possibility... is built into the whole network of Zande beliefs.... It may be said, for instance, that bad benge [a substance used in oracle rituals] is being used; that the operator of the oracle is ritually unclean; that the oracle is being itself influenced by witchcraft or sorcery; or it may be that the oracle is showing that the question cannot be answered straightforwardly in its present form...."24 Unlike the case of the superstitious Christian, whose concept of rationality will conflict with his or her beliefs for which no reason will suffice, the "superstitious" Azande have no concept outside their complex concept of witchcraft to contradict it. All observations of empirical science, even the "miraculous," can be brought into line with that science; all observations of Zande oracles, even those later seen to be incorrect, can be likewise understood by Zande on their own terms.

Stepping back for a moment: religion (understood in a Wittgensteinian sense) and science do not contradict one another, because of the different ways they are used — the different ways they enter the believer’s life. A religious picture is not a proposition to be judged by the criteria of the natural sciences, nor can we count empirical events as evidence for the validity of any such picture. But the example of the Zande does not run quite parallel. How to determine whether witchcraft is present, or when an oracle has gone awry, and so forth, is decidedly empirical, in the sense that one cites specific happenings and observations, forms hypotheses of a sort, considers and reconsiders evidence, and so on. The dimension of "probably" is present in Zande oracles, in a way Wittgenstein says is not present in religion: "Suppose someone were a believer and said: ‘I believe in a Last Judgement,’ and I said: ‘Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.’ You would say there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said ‘There is a German airplane overhead,’ and I said ‘Possibly I’m not so sure,’ you’d say we were fairly near."25 Expressions of doubt and corresponding expressions of partial belief (i.e. "possibly") have no place in religious language-games. Yet they seem to play a role in the language of Zande witchcraft. Can we not on this ground claim the Azande to be a tribe of superstition? Even if their beliefs are coherent in a manner like ours, and in a manner the superstitious Christian’s are not, theirs is simply an alternative science, and, gauging by our more advanced technology, we can say that we are right, right?

Here I must equivocate. I partially agree with the idea that science as in

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Science is “better” in some sense than Zandean magic, but not at all for the above reasons. The key here is the line in the passage quoted at the start of this section, in which Wittgenstein describes encountering islanders different from ourselves. Certain of their linguistic practices are such that “we wouldn’t know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs.” It is not as though the Zande have nothing which resembles our science, and nothing which resembles our religions; they are one and the same thing. The science/religion/superstition distinction which we have worked so hard to understand for our society simply makes no sense for the Azande. Or perhaps the point is that the Azande do not make sense of their world in that way. Winch notes that while the Azande may not have a science/non-science distinction, they do have a technical/magical one.26 The Zande have the extensive natural knowledge required to live in the wild (or what we would call “the wild”), and can offer explanations of natural events in those terms, such as a hut burning down in terms of straw and flame. But the magical explanation described why the (technically described) event came about, e.g., so-and-so has used witchcraft on my hut.27

"No empirical evidence can justify or overthrow a whole system of language games, or prove or refute a given picture, be it African, Catholic, or set-theoretical."

would call something the result of witchcraft. The Azande notion of the reasonable does not align with ours perfectly, and all the earlier arguments for the non-paradoxical nature of religion go through here, with the addendum that we cannot object to certain Zande practices on the ground that they are “superstitious” (even though we might validly object to practices in our own culture on the basis of that distinction). The Zande have their pictures, too, which may express ideas and relations that simply have no correspondence to ideas and relations represented in any of our pictures. It is still a mistake here, even though the pictures are pictures of empirical objects (e.g., crops) to assume that all pictures of this sort are better or worse scientific pictures, for “it depends on the further surroundings of it.”

Winch goes on to describe how Zande practices may “express an attitude to contingencies.”28 As we saw earlier, this “attitude” cannot be taken as reducible to some expression like “I don’t like accidents,” for the Zandean picture of witchcraft may be the best picture possible of this attitude. Magical rites do concern the direct physical well-being of the tribe, but that does not mean that we can take them as simply or only that. Magic is more than a “(misguided) technique for producing consumer goods.... a Zande’s crops are
not just potential objects of consumption: the life he lives, his relations with his fellows, his chances for acting decently or doing evil, may all spring from his relation to his crops.”29 These dimensions of Zande life, which are all tied up in the use they make of their language-games, cannot be captured in any Western equivalent. This all shows that, as far apart as a Western believer and non-believer are, both are still further from the Zande.

But there is still a sense, I want to conclude, in which all three — Zande, Christian, and atheist — are essentially similar. This is the sense of Winch’s “limiting notions,”30 such as our conceptions of birth, death, procreation, societal relations — notions without which it makes no sense to talk of a life as being a human life, which is able to conceptualize and reflect upon these facts of our existence. Therefore, such things as hope, fear, thought, pain, and language (cf. p. 174 of the Investigations) must be included as well. Any system or society must take all these into account — what it means to live in any form of life. And I agree. But we must also note that even at the center of all this humanity, which can take so many different expressions, there is this animal, which shuns death, and feeds itself, and so on — a dead human is even worse at thinking than a live horse or rabbit. My point is a political one, an admonition to those who would claim that all “sciences,” Azande or Western are “just as good.” Even though the technical dimension in no way exhausts the depth and connections of the Azande conception of life, we cannot assume that it is secondary. All peoples, all societies, all forms of life value this sort of knowledge, which puts food in their children’s mouths. The language-game of science (though not Scientism) belongs to all people, for everyone since humanity’s first days as humanity have tracked game, studied the seasons, determined what herbs are poisonous and which safe, tamed animals, tested different ways to clear trees, charted when the river rises and falls, examined which seeds grew hearty grain and how this trait might be preserved, what form of oven is best for cooking the bread, and so on and so forth.

The universality of these language-games implies also a universal standard, a universal ethical criterion: does it work? Does it maintain the animal existence which makes possible all that is human? For to this extent all humans form a “we” which we all share as our form of life. If a given technique or technology aids in these matters, then it is “better.” But I will leave the question open as to whether the Western science of dead lakes, brown air, serial killers, heart disease, and nuclear weapons is terribly optimal on these criteria.

**Conclusion**

I THINK IT IS FRUITFUL, HAVING ESTABLISHED THAT NO empirical evidence can justify or overthrow a whole system of language games, or prove or refute a given picture, be it African, Catholic, or set-theoretical, to see just what role experiences do play in our lives on this basic level. What does experience do beneath our reasons? And, moreover, what does this all say about philosophy? In Culture and Value, Wittgenstein writes:

Life 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.

So perhaps it is similar to the concept of 'object.'

The subject of philosophy, which I take to deal with precisely such concepts as "objects," "thoughts" and "sensations," has still this task before it of understanding what in our form of life (which we take as the given) gives rise to these concepts. We can also see why it has been so hard to relate what have been called "Western philosophy" and "Eastern philosophy." We might just as well ask for a "Zandeian philosophy," if and when that society becomes literary. The philosophical problems of a society are going to be often quite specific to that society, for each society shapes the formative experiences of its members and in this manner determines what concepts have the potential to be problematic, i.e., what concepts will lie below reasons, nesting in the heart of the very form of life and all its connected uses of various pictures and language games. This is, in a sense, a very Kantian analysis: we ask, what must be prior to our particular forms of experience? What are the experiences that make someone a believer in God? A skeptic? A witch? A physicist? A logical positivist? It can make no sense to cite specific reasons for what makes a person who they are — it is not a matter for science. Rather, certain pictures of the person give us insights into their form of life, and in this way we can hope to understand one another better.

ENDNOTES

4References to the Philosophical Investigations will be of that form, "§" indicating section number or "p." indicating page number in the Anscombe translation, New York: Macmillan, 1958.
5Lectures and Conversations, p. 63.
6Ibid., p. 63.
7Winch, Peter. Trying to Make Sense. p. 79.
8Lectures and Conversations, p. 72.
9Winch, Peter. Trying to Make Sense. p. 70.
10Lectures and Conversations, p. 71.
11Ibid., p. 57.
21 Culture and Value, p. 86. This problem of judgement is one we are running into today in a secular sense; the ethical sphere, which demands free will, is running dangerously close to the scientific, psychiatric sphere, which can allow no such thing.