Subjectivity after Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein's embodied and embedded subject and the debate about the death of man

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Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion

4.1 Introduction

Born into a family of assimilated Jews and given a Catholic burial on the initiative of his friends, Wittgenstein himself was never a practicing believer of any persuasion. Judging by the recollections of those who knew him from up close, however, as well as by the more personal remarks in his notebooks, it is evident that Wittgenstein was occupied with questions of a religious nature throughout his life. He did not consider these to be of a purely private import but deemed a reflection on what it means to believe in the Last Judgement or to perform rituals, say, to be philosophically interesting as well. These topics are at any rate examined in a number of the texts that are part of his philosophical legacy, such as the Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough” and the Lectures on Religious Belief. Yet as Wittgenstein indicated at several occasions, even the writings that do not explicitly deal with religious affairs can be said to have a religious purport or angle. He explained that the Tractatus ultimately does not concern logic or language but rather those matters that the treatise rules out from being talked about – namely, ethics and religion – and stated at the time of writing the Investigations: “I am not a religious man but cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”

As a result, much has been written on this subject after steady publication of Wittgenstein’s Nachlass gradually brought his religious interest to light. Commentators have discussed Wittgenstein’s religious views in their own right as well as in relation to his philosophy as a whole, hinted at but by no means clarified in the remark quoted just now. Let me immediately point out that the following

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1 More details about Wittgenstein’s personal life can be found in McGuinness 1988, Monk 1990 and Waugh 2008 (the latter recounting the vicissitudes of the entire Wittgenstein family).
2 See BF 35-36.
3 Drury 1981b, p. 94.
chapter does not contribute to these undertakings. That is to say, I will discuss Wittgenstein’s writings on religion not so much for their own sake as for the light they may shed on his account of the mental, so to the extent that I connect his religious views to his philosophy more broadly, it is with regard to Wittgensteinian subjectivity rather than Wittgensteinian methodology. In what follows, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, I will look at his philosophy of religion from a psychological point of view. For as I explained in the preceding intermezzo, Wittgenstein’s writings on religiosity provide an excellent opportunity for exploring the implications of the claim that the subject’s sociality and materiality are essential to it, as Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology time and again underscores.

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4 One of the most heated debates about Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion concerns his (purported) fideism. This debate was instigated by Kai Nielsen, who argued in a 1967 paper that Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion (with D.Z. Philips as the main representative) present religion as an isolated language game that needs no justification and can certainly not be criticized by anyone not participating in it; an intolerable perspective. Phillips et al. subsequently tried to show that they never made the claims Nielsen attributed to them, and most importantly argued that there is an even more basic reason why Wittgensteinians cannot be accused of fideism: they do not support theories of any kind, whether fideistic or not. For an overview of the main contributions to this debate as well as further reflection thereon, see Nielsen & Phillips 2005; for a critical evaluation of the debate see Amesbury 2003. Although the fideism debate touches on a number of issue I also explore, in this as well as in other chapters, I will not discuss it any further here because it does not add to my investigation into the compatibility of Wittgenstein’s view on religion and his thoughts on the psyche. As should be clear from my exposition in chapter 2, I think that Phillips c.s. are incorrect in claiming that Wittgenstein can be ascribed no substantive accounts whatsoever. However (and although I reject the apparent premise that Wittgenstein’s account of religious belief can be considered to be on a par with his account of certainty - more on that in the second intermezzo) I think that Nielsen is wrong to attribute Wittgenstein the claim that once a person has made a certain conviction his own, it can never again come up for discussion; I will develop an argument along these lines in chapter 5.

5 For writings on the parallels between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion and his general philosophical method, see e.g. Malcolm 1993, Shields 1993, McCutcheon 2001. Needless to say, to the extent that these commentators take Wittgenstein to undermine rather than participate in philosophical discussions, I cannot wholly agree with their interpretations, even if their readings of Wittgenstein’s religious writings resemble mine. Let me however point out that I do not take Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion to be entirely unrelated to Wittgensteinian methodology. That is to say, I will argue later on (see pp. 159-161 of this study) that Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion raises a similar question as his approach to philosophy, namely: How is it possible for the subject to break or suspend the conventions of its community in order to choose its own outlook on life and/or philosophically explore the concepts and certainties it has inherited? (Note that the latter question results from my specific interpretation of Wittgenstein’s method and reflects my somewhat divergent understanding thereof - even though I think that a more therapeutic reading should come to terms with it as well; see pp. 161-162 of this study.) I will take up these questions in the fifth and final chapter.

6 Kerr 1986 also brings Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion in connection with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology. He points out that idea of a private ego is also a religious myth (see Kerr 1986, p. 43) and explains that just as Wittgenstein criticizes the model of object and designation when it comes to mental matters, he rejects the idea that theological concepts must refer to a metaphysical reality (see pp. 151-156). While these parallels certainly hold, I bring Wittgenstein’s view on religion and his thoughts on the psyche together in a different way, discussing religious belief as a psychological phenomenon.
My findings of the previous chapter will accordingly guide me in the current chapter too. I will look at Wittgenstein’s remarks on religious belief with basically two questions in mind, derived from my conclusion that Wittgenstein situates psychological phenomena on the outside rather than the inside of the subject, or even in the interspace between a community of subjects. First of all, I will investigate to what extent Wittgenstein holds that religious belief comes to life or resides in a person’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Disregarding the *Culture and Value* remark quoted in the preceding intermezzo, in which Wittgenstein apparently describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of something literally inner,\(^7\) I will examine whether a non-Cartesian perspective on the mind-body relation is by and large at work in his philosophy of religion too. The first question to be answered will thus be: Does Wittgenstein maintain that (the contextualized shades of) somebody’s doings and sayings form the locus of his or her belief?

That Wittgenstein situates mental matters on the outside rather the inside of the subject (without thereby reducing the inner to the outer) formed an important motivation for my summarizing my findings by means of the notion of seeing-as, but as I explained, the parallel with aspect perception is also instructive when it comes to capturing the sociality of Wittgensteinian subjectivity. For just as a person’s duck perception can be explained by her seeing the duck/rabbit, not in isolation, but against the background of other (picture-)ducks, an onlooker is able to see gratitude or grief in someone’s contextualized shades of behaviour because she instantly takes it to be an instance of a larger communal pattern. In addition to exploring the inner-outer model at work in his religious writings, I will therefore investigate to what extent Wittgenstein grants the community a similar role when it come to religious belief. The second question to be explored will accordingly be: Does Wittgenstein claim that someone can only be called a religious believer when he has made a particular expressive pattern his own and is able to participate in pre-existing religious practices? When the latter question has been answered as well, it should be sufficiently clear to what extent Wittgenstein’s account of religiosity is compatible with his philosophy of psychology.

However, in my attempt to determine this compatibility, I will not answer these two questions one by one. That is to say, instead of dividing the following chapter into two sections, the one devoted to the exteriority of religiosity and the other to the sociality thereof, I will consecutively discuss the main writings that are part of Wittgenstein’s religious *Nachlass*. To be sure, I will discuss these works with the questions just formulated in the back of my mind, but I will only make up the final balance after an overview of Wittgenstein’s contemplations on religious belief has been given. Hence, in contrast to the other parts of this dissertation, the following chapter will have a chronological rather than a systematic structure – even though

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\(^7\) See CV 33a; cf. pp. 99-100 of the preceding intermezzo.
it is with the aim of answering two systematic questions that I discuss them in the first place.

Several of Wittgenstein’s writings can be consulted in an attempt to answer the questions about religious belief as a psychological phenomenon. There are, first of all, the remarks on ethics and religion in the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks*, a collection of notes written between 1914 and 1916 that can be considered a preliminary to Wittgenstein’s groundbreaking first (and only) book. The *Lecture on Ethics*, which Wittgenstein delivered in 1929, also forms a valuable source of information for making some of the views expounded in these early writings more explicit. I will discuss the *Tractatus*, the *Notebooks* and the *Lecture on Ethics* collectively in the first section devoted to Wittgenstein’s religious views proper, which is the second section of this chapter. The third section will discuss the *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”*: a series of comments, written partly before 1931 and partly after 1948, on an at the time highly influential anthropological study of various indigenous rituals. The fourth section, furthermore, examines the *Lectures on Religious Belief*. This collection of remarks consists of the notes that Wittgenstein’s students took down during a number of lectures he gave in 1938 and in which he explored the meaning and status of religious statements and concepts. In the fifth and final section exploring Wittgenstein’s religious works, I will look at a selection of remarks written between 1914 and 1951 (thus spanning most of Wittgenstein’s adult life), which were scattered through the manuscripts he left behind yet do not seem to be part of his “regular” philosophical work. Many of these remarks, nowadays known under the title *Culture and Value*, concern faith and religion. At several points in the sections to come, last of all, I will refer to the recollections of those who got to know Wittgenstein personally, of whom Maurice O’Drury is probably most important in this context. Drury made Wittgenstein’s acquaintance in 1929 and discussed religious affairs with him on a regular basis until Wittgenstein’s death in 1951, at which Drury also was present.

Two further, not entirely unrelated things need to be pointed out before I embark upon my reading of these writings. As should be clear from the above outline, firstly, the following explorations will lead me through both earlier and later parts of Wittgenstein’s œuvre. While Wittgenstein suggested that a religious perspective informed his every thought, his *Nachlass* contains less remarks that explicitly deal with religion than remarks on, say, mind or meaning, and it would be imprudent to exclude a specific subset of an already limited group of comments beforehand. What is more, regardless of the discontinuity that may exist between his earlier and later thoughts on a topic like language, Wittgenstein’s views on religious belief do not seem to have changed fundamentally over the years.⁸ From

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⁸ Cf. Barrett 1991, pp. xii-xiii; Clack 1999, p. 38; Hughes 2001, p. 85. Rhees argues that there is a discontinuity between Wittgenstein’s earlier and later thoughts on ethics (see Rhees 1965, p. 21). However, he contends that the development in question follows or runs parallel to transformations as regards Wittgenstein’s method (see pp. 24-25), even going so far as to suggest
the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks* placing religion firmly on the value side of the fact-value dichotomy, to the *Remarks on Frazer* arguing that rituals do not stem from a proto-scientific theory, and the *Lectures on Religious Belief* stating that a dispute about the Last Judgement cannot be settled by pointing to empirical facts – quite a consistent picture emerges from Wittgenstein’s writings on religion, both early and late. From this perspective, there is not much reason to leave the *Tractatus*, the *Notebooks* and the *Lecture on Ethics* undiscussed.

That is not to say that there is no difference whatsoever between Wittgenstein’s earlier and Wittgenstein’s later contemplations on religious matters, and this brings me to the second point that needs to be made in advance of the explorations to come. To the extent that writings such as the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks* differ from writings such as the *Remarks on Frazer* and the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, it seems that the former, much more than the latter, do not only or primarily concern the status or structure of religious belief, but also give expression to Wittgenstein’s own ethico-religious convictions. However, even if form and content can never be neatly separated, it is not so much Wittgenstein’s personal beliefs that I am interested in, as his description of what belief is in the first place. In what follows, put differently, I will investigate Wittgenstein’s ontology of faith and religion (or his combined ontology, epistemology and sociology thereof, to use the terminology of the previous chapter) rather than his individual views on God and the meaning of life. And when it comes to exploring the former, some of the *Tractatus* and *Notebooks* entries, apart from expressing Wittgenstein’s personal convictions, explicitly address the relationship between belief and behaviour - which is the topic of one of the questions I have just laid out. Let me get around to answering them.

9 It should be noted that this is perhaps due to a difference in focus rather than to a difference in age or maturity; some of the older CV remarks after all express Wittgenstein’s personal convictions as well.

10 That is to say, they discuss the relationship between willing and acting, but as I will shortly explain, Wittgenstein takes the will to be the bearer of ethico-religious value.
4.2 “One cannot will without doing”

As one of the Tractarian theses states, it is the task of philosophy to “set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought.” One of the things the Tractatus argues to be unthinkable and unspeakable (for it takes the limits of the thinkable and the speakable to coincide) is ethics and religion. Wittgenstein however does not argue that one should remain silent about these matters because he wishes to dispose of the ethico-religious in its entirety, as the logical-positivists for instance thought when they first read the book. By consigning ethics and religion to the realm of the unspeakable, Wittgenstein hopes to give them a much firmer place in the Tractarian system in the end. Needless to say, several manoeuvres are required in order to reach this goal; the steps taken by Wittgenstein can be traced in the Tractatus as well as the Notebooks and the Lecture on Ethics.

According to the ontology expounded in the Tractatus, the world is a place of accident and arbitrariness. None of the facts that make up the world exist out of

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11 TLP 4.114. It should be noted that the exact aim and method of TLP, which makes an impressive amount of claims only to retract them in TLP 6.54, is far from clear and much debated. The New Wittgensteinians (Cora Diamond and James Conant, among others) defend what is possibly the most radical interpretation, arguing that TLP does not convey any insights, ineffable or otherwise, but is designed to make its readers realize the utter nonsensicality of philosophy. (See Crary 2000 for a collection of papers defending this view; it comes with a specific reading of the later method – I accordingly mentioned it in chapter two as well - but originates in a renewed perspective on TLP, which is the focus of the second part of Crary 2000.) Now if this would be the only correct way to read TLP, the following exposition could be rejected beforehand. For not only does it read the TLP theses non-ironically, it also concerns some of the things that, on a less radical reading of TLP, cannot be said but still show themselves. In other words, as becomes clear in the context of a discussion of Wittgenstein’s ethics, the New Wittgensteinians not only make it hard to understand why the later Wittgenstein consistently criticized his earlier views (see e.g. PI p. ix, PI 23, PI 97, PI 144, RPpi 38, OC 321 - why would these explicitly mention TLP insights if it expressed none in the first place?), this radical reading also makes it hard to account for the immense importance Wittgenstein apparently attached to the ineffable (see e.g. BF 35-36, NB 7.7.16, NB 30.7.16, LE 44). In what follows, however, I will not give my own interpretation of TLP’s aim and method; for rejections of the New Wittgenstein reading, see Hacker 2000; Proops 2001; Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 84-118; and Stokhof 2002, pp. 274-276.

12 It should be noted that Wittgenstein tends to address these matters primarily under the label of ethics, but uses this label in a quite specific (if not idiosyncratic) way (cf. Barrett 1991, p. 33, p. 58; Hughes 2001, pp. 71-72). He uses it for reflections, not on what should be done on particular occasions, but on the meaning of life more generally - which explains why he is not unwilling to employ religious terms as well. In what follows, I will use “ethics” and “religion” alternately, often using “ethico-religious” to indicate their interchangeability in a Wittgensteinian context (and what is more, I will conclude this section by arguing that it the ethical part of Wittgenstein’s early writings offer an exploration of religious belief rather than a contribution to the conventional study of ethics). Also, even though this is an interesting question, I will not discuss how the ethico-religious relates to other matters Wittgenstein claims to be unspeakable, such as logic and philosophy.

necessity, and all that is might just as well have been different.\textsuperscript{14} To be sure, the world as we know it exhibits certain law-like regularities, but these in turn depend on the accidental make-up of the actual world, which is only one of many possible worlds. Causal connections can therefore not be said to be necessary in the most fundamental sense of the word; according to Wittgenstein, only the logical laws that form the scaffolding of the world are entitled to that description: “outside logic everything is accidental.”\textsuperscript{15} In addition, Wittgenstein makes a strict distinction between fact and contingency on the one hand, and value and necessity on the other, maintaining that nothing of true ethico-religious import can be found among the worldly states of affairs.\textsuperscript{16} Similar to his view that the law-like regularities our world exhibits are not necessary in any fundamental way, Wittgenstein distinguishes between value in a relative and value in an absolute sense, and argues that worldly happenings can, as worldly happenings, only be called good or bad in the relative meaning of the word.

This perspective is expounded in the \textit{Lecture on Ethics}. When we say that someone is a good piano player or that it is important not to catch a cold, Wittgenstein points out, we say this with a specific standard or goal in mind. We call a person a first-rate pianist when she “can play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity,” and appreciate not catching a cold because a cold “produces certain describable disturbances in [one’s] life.”\textsuperscript{17} Wittgenstein dubs these kind of statements judgments of relative value because they only describe someone or something as good relative to a specific goal. As a result, Wittgenstein continues, these judgements can also be formulated in purely factual terms. The sentence “This is the right way to Amsterdam” can for example be rephrased as: “This is the road to take if you want to get to Amsterdam in the shortest time.”

When it comes to judgements of absolute or ethical value, on the other hand, no such rephrasing is possible. A statement about the morally good or bad could not involve an “if”, for whereas we would find it perfectly acceptable for someone to reply to a claim about the right way to Amsterdam that he wants to take the scenic rather than the shortest route, or that he does not want to go to Amsterdam at all, we would not accept a person informed of the indecency of his behaviour to retort: “I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better.”\textsuperscript{18} Wittgenstein takes the morally good to be unconditionally good. For the same reason, he holds that a statement about the absolutely valuable could, unlike a statement of relative value, not be about any specific state of affairs. Wittgenstein contends that nothing that occurs in the worldly realm is intrinsically valuable.

\textsuperscript{15} TLP 6.3.
\textsuperscript{16} See TLP 6.41, TB 24.7.16, TB 30.7.16, TB 2.8.16, TB 12.10.16, LE 39-40, LE 43-44.
\textsuperscript{17} LE 38.
\textsuperscript{18} LE 39.
What we would for instance call a murder - her finger pulling the trigger, the bullet piercing his heart – is in reality nothing but a specific constellation of facts, nothing in and of these happenings themselves is either good or bad: “The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone.”

According to Wittgenstein, all that happens in the world occurs on the same factual level, and while these happenings can be ascribed relative value, as purely worldly events they are neither good nor bad but ethically neutral.

The example Wittgenstein uses to support his view may not be the most convincing, to say the least, especially since he is speaking of a murder here himself – “murder” is, after all, an evaluative rather than a descriptive term. However, as this Freudian slip already indicates, Wittgenstein does not mean to say that there is nothing unethical whatsoever about the wilful taking of another’s life. He means to say that in so far as such an event is immoral, it does not reside in anything factual, in anything clear and distinct we can point to and call its murderousness, so to speak. This non-factual character of ethico-religious value also explains why Wittgenstein, though he initially introduces the distinction between relative and absolute value as a distinction between types of statements, ultimately claims that the morally good and bad belong to those matters we cannot speak about. As the Lecture on Ethics continues: “Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural, and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour out a gallon over it.”

Given the Tractarian theory of meaning, according to which language serves and only serves to picture specific states of affairs, ethics’ ineffability automatically follows from its non-factuality.

It should furthermore be noted that Wittgenstein does not simply take this non-factuality and ineffability for a fact; he is adamant that it need not be deplored. For if something of ethico-religious value were to be found in the world, the Tractatus explains, it would, by virtue of its being just a fact among others, no longer be of true significance: “in [the world] no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.” The non-factuality of ethics and religion thus safeguards that these have worth and significance at all, according to Wittgenstein. What is more, that the ethico-religious does not belong to the

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19 LE 40.
20 As I will explain shortly, worldly happening can be ascribe ethical value when one looks at them from a different, non-factual point of view.
21 Cf. Hughes 2001, p. 83. Hughes maintains that Wittgenstein’s claim here is untenable. In the remainder of this section, I will come back to Wittgenstein’s claim several times and gradually hope to make his reasons for holding it more clear. (Though that obviously does not mean that his analysis of the murder example thereby also necessarily becomes more convincing.)
22 LE 40; see also TLP 6.4, TLP 6.42, TLP 6.421.
23 TLP 6.41.
24 It should also safeguard the ethico-religious from what Wittgenstein considers to be the wrong kind of treatment: he maintains that one should not conceive of it as something that can be discussed and investigated empirically; see TLP 6.52, LE 43-44. As will become clear in the
domain of the factual does not mean that it has no bearing on worldly affairs at all. As Wittgenstein states in the *Notebooks*, at any rate, it is the human subject that guarantees the connection between ethics and the world: “Good and evil only enter through the subject.”

In the context of Wittgenstein’s early writings, however, “subject” is not an unequivocal term - the human being cannot be appointed the bearer of ethics without further ado. Wittgenstein distinguishes several notions of subjectivity, and in order to understand in what sense he takes it to be the source of ethico-religious worth, we need to have a look at what he more generally does and does not hold the subject to be, as well as what kind or feature of subjectivity he explicitly denies of having any ethico-religious import.

When it comes to the basic ontology of the subjectivity, first of all, the early Wittgenstein - not unlike the later one - takes issue with the Cartesian account of the nature of man. Indeed, the *Tractatus* emphatically states that “there is no such thing as the soul – the subject, etc. – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day.” That is to say, Wittgenstein does not deny that the individual or psychological human being (to use the terminology he himself employs) exists, but points out that in so far as the subject is part of the world, it can only be explained in contingent and factual terms. And this holds just as much for a person’s thoughts and feelings as for her body and behaviour. According to the Tractarian ontology, after all, everything we can encounter or experience in the world is, by virtue of its being a worldly affair, of the same factual nature.

Moreover, the concept of a pre-given and unchanging bearer of psychological phenomena, such as the one postulated by Cartesianism, becomes highly suspect once it is assumed that the only necessity there is, is logical necessity. On the early Wittgenstein’s view, thoughts and feelings simply are events in and of the world; the postulation of a Cartesian realm in order to account for them is neither

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25 NB 1.8.16.
26 The following exposition draws on the interpretation given in Stokhof 2002, explaining that Wittgenstein in fact makes two pairs of distinctions when it comes to subjectivity (see pp. 191-210): first between the individual/psychological and the metaphysical subject, and in addition between the knowing subject and the willing subject. According to Stokhof, these distinctions are by and large orthogonal, though it might be somewhat misleading to distinguish them in a very rigid way. In what follows, I will accordingly not introduce all four Tractarian notions of subjectivity equally explicitly, and will also leave some of the discussions in which they figure untouched. For a more detailed exposition of the younger Wittgenstein’s view on the subject, that also traces Schopenhauer’s influence thereupon, I refer to Stokhof’s book.
27 As I will explain, the early Wittgenstein maintains that psychological phenomena are simply factual events among others, which is not exactly in line with Wittgenstein’s later views on the mental. Even so, there can be said to be a continuity in the sense that both the early and the later Wittgenstein argue against the existence of a Cartesian private realm. I will come back to this shortly.
28 TLP 5.5421.
acceptable nor necessary: “All experience is world and does not need the subject.”

The early Wittgenstein, in other words, supports a Humean account of human being. What he calls the individual or psychological subject consists of nothing over and above a contingent cluster of experiences. This “thin” conception of subjectivity is subsequently supplemented or contrasted with another one, for as Wittgenstein continues, we can also talk about the self as something other than a mere bundle of thoughts and feelings. However, it follows from the Tractarian ontology that in so far as we want to say that the human being is a special kind of being or is unlike anything else we encounter in the world, it cannot be part thereof. The early Wittgenstein therefore contrasts the psychological subject with the so-called metaphysical subject, which concerns the human being, not as a fact among others, but as a limit to the factual realm: “The philosophical I is not the human being, not the human body or the human soul with the psychological properties, but the metaphysical subject, the boundary (not a part) of the world.”

It is with regard to this form of subjectivity that Wittgenstein holds solipsism to be both true and coincident with realism, as some of the more notorious Tractarian theses hold. These conclusions follows from Wittgenstein’s assumption that logic, being necessary in the most fundamental sense of the word, only comes in one form. Given that it is this one logic that makes up the skeleton or scaffold of the world, there should be said to be only one world form – and if there is only one world form, there is also only one subject to constitute the limit of the world. Wittgenstein however also holds that the metaphysical subject is in turn dependent on the world it delimits, meaning that the kind of solipsism he takes to be true, is ultimately not very substantial. But since the theses about the metaphysical subject do not deal with the subject as the bearer of ethics, there is no need to discuss them any further here.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, does discuss the status of the psychological subject in ethico-religious affairs. Given the strict distinction he makes between

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29 NB 9.11.16; see also TLP 5.541-5.5421.
31 NB 2.9.16; see also TLP 5.632-5.633, TLP 5.641.
33 Or perhaps this should read: Wittgenstein discusses the status of the individual thinking subject in ethico-religious affair. As I pointed out in note 26 with reference to Stokhof 2002, Wittgenstein makes two pairs of distinctions when it comes to subjectivity: in addition two his distinction between the individual and the metaphysical subject, he distinguishes between the knowing and the willing subject. I think that the latter distinction can be explained in terms of two different perspectives that are possible on the former two types of subjectivity: one can approach both the individual and the metaphysical subject from a knowing as well as from a willing perspective. To put this somewhat more elaborately, according to Wittgenstein (who clearly follows Schopenhauer here) one can look at individual and metaphysical subjectivity as being (or not being) part of the world as we discuss it in both science and everyday life, and one look at them from an atemporal, nonfactual ethical perspective. My exposition thus far concerns the individual and the
the factual and the (absolutely) valuable, it should come as no surprise that he
denies this form or facet of subjectivity any moral import. Conceived of as a
cluster of thoughts and feelings and doings and sayings, the human being cannot
be the bearer of ethics, because worldly events as such are ethically neutral. In the
*Lecture on Ethics,* to come back to the example discussed a moment ago,
Wittgenstein accordingly holds that the thoughts and intentions of the person
pulling the trigger do not account for the immorality of a murder: “a state of mind,
so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good
or bad.”

This also reflects Wittgenstein’s identifying the valuable with the necessary on
the one hand, and the factual with the contingent on the other. As I already
explained the Tractarian worldview, the only connections that can properly be
called necessary are logical ones, which means that there never is a (truly) necessary
connection between a person’s intentions and the events that do or do not follow
them. Given Wittgenstein’s assumption that the ethico-religious belongs to the
non-accidental sphere, this in turn implies that it is not someone’s concrete
intentions that make worldly events morally good or bad. The consequences of a
person’s actions are similarly ruled out from having any impact on the (im)morality
thereof, as can be made clear by means of the murder example as well. If
someone dies as a result of another’s shooting at him, this still belongs to the
accidental rather than the necessary domain and is therefore irrelevant when it
comes to absolute or ethical value. According to the theory laid out in
Wittgenstein’s early work, neither the intentions that precede a person’s doings and
sayings nor the effects that follow from them make any moral difference in the
world.

Hence, when Wittgenstein declares that good and evil only enter through the
subject, he does not have the individual in mind, conceived of as a contingent
cluster of doings and undergoings. However, this does not mean that there is, in
the context of the Tractarian system, nothing about human beings that can ever be
called morally good or bad. While Wittgenstein’s downgrading the importance of
intentions and consequences may go against our everyday concept of morality, he
does not go so far as to state that human beings or human behaviour is never of an
(im)moral nature. According to Wittgenstein, the individual subject turns out to be
just a fact among others when one looks at it from a logical point of view, but

metaphysical subject as part of (respectively limit to) the world, hence from a knowing
perspective. I will change to the willing perspective shortly.

34 LE 39.
35 See TLP 6.422.
36 And as a result, in so far as Wittgenstein’s claim that ethics requires subjectivity bears
resemblance to the arguments that commentator such as Frank and Murdoch levelled against the
rethinkers of Cartesianism (see intermezzo I), the concept of subjectivity he employs differs
significantly from theirs. Murdoch’s claim that in the transition from TLP to PI, something inner
is lost (see Murdoch 1992, p. 49) does not seem entirely correct, not only from the perspective of
the later work but also from the perspective of the early work.
there is also a different perspective one can take. Indeed, one can conceive of the entire world as a specific constellation of facts, but it is also possible to conceive of it as something in which, despite or beyond its factuality, the absolutely valuable manifests itself.\(^{37}\) From this perspective, the individual subject appears in a wholly different light, and it is subjectivity in this particular guise that Wittgenstein appoints the bearer of ethico-religious worth. In order to bring out the difference with the individual taken as a bundle of thoughts and feelings, Wittgenstein reserves a different label for it and dubs it the willing subject: “I will call ‘will’ first and foremost the bearer of good and evil.”\(^{38}\)

In so far as Wittgenstein’s remark about the intentions of a murderer is at odds with the way we might ordinarily come to accuse someone of murder – instead of of manslaughter, say – his concept of the will is in line with what we normally judge to be good or evil in so far as he takes the will to be intrinsically connected to an individual’s behaviour. It is, after all, first and foremost human conduct to which our moral concepts apply. However, and in spite of the fact that Wittgenstein uses a seemingly everyday term for the source of ethico-religious value, this is also where the correspondence to ordinary morality breaks down again. To the extent that our doings and sayings are concrete worldly events, Wittgenstein cannot hold them to be good or evil without further ado. Moreover, for the same reason that he is forced to deny a person’s intentions any moral import and cannot locate such import in the consequences of someone’s actions either, Wittgenstein is prevented from taking the ethical will to relate to behaviour as the phenomenon we normally call by that name.

Normally we say that a person’s will precedes his doings and sayings and that he performs these activities as a result of his willing them or in order to bring another desired state of affairs about. Now if this is the way the ethical will enters into the empirical domain, Wittgenstein argues, it would make ethico-religious worth into a wholly arbitrary affair. According to the ontology expounded in the *Tractatus*, to once more repeat my earlier exposition, only logical connections can be called truly necessary and non-accidental. From this perspective, it is simply a matter of luck when a desired state of affairs comes to pass subsequent to one’s performing certain activities – indeed, it is simply a matter of luck when one’s arm moves subsequent to one’s willing it to raise. “Even if everything that we want were to happen,” Wittgenstein states, “this would still only be, so to speak, a grace of fate.”\(^{39}\) That is to say, there may be causal connections that explain why a certain event did or did not follow my wanting to bring it about, but these

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\(^{37}\) I will shortly say more on the exact difference between these two perspectives.

\(^{38}\) NB 21.7.16; see also NB 11.6.16, NB 5.8.16, NB 15.10.16. Though perhaps my formulation should run: Wittgenstein dubs it the *individual* willing subject - for he also distinguishes a *metaphysical* will. (And here, too, Wittgenstein follows the example of Schopenhauer; cf. Stokhof 2002, pp. 203-210.)

\(^{39}\) NB 5.7.16; see also TLP 6.374, NB 29.7.16, NB 20.10.16.
connections are dependent on the way the world happens to be and are therefore not necessary in any fundamental way.

In combination with the strict dichotomy Wittgenstein supports between fact and contingency on the one hand, and value and necessity on the other, this means that in so far as human behaviour is connected to willing in the ethical sense, it cannot be the effect or instrument of the will. Wittgenstein is accordingly keen to distinguish the ethical from the ordinary will, and reserves the term “wish” for the latter. It is the not will, he contends, but the wish that precedes our acting and whose outcome is dependent on chance. But the wish is also a contingent phenomenon in another respect: in addition to its being related to its objects in a non-necessary way, it is also always directed at concrete worldly events. In an attempt to prevent ethics from turning out to be an arbitrary affair, Wittgenstein defines the ethical will by means of its contrast to the everyday wish and distinguishes the former from the latter in both respects just mentioned. He claims: “The act of the will is not the cause of the action but is the action itself. One cannot will without acting,” and declares: “If the will has to have an object in the world, the object can be the intended action itself.” Wittgenstein thus suggests that the ethico-religious will concurs or coincides with our actions, both in the sense of not preceding them and in the sense of not being directed at anything else.

This move may not seem to be of much avail in preventing ethics from becoming an arbitrary affair, for if willing wholly coincides with acting, it should ultimately be said to be as much a contingent fact as our doings and sayings and everything else we encounter in the world. As Wittgenstein however also proclaims: “The will is an attitude of the subject to the world.” By means of this statement, it can be made clear how the ethico-religious will is neither itself of a factual nature, nor directed at any purely factual things.

At this point, another distinction needs to be introduced first. Similar to his distinguishing between an individual and a metaphysical subject when it comes to the basic ontology of subjectivity, Wittgenstein maintains that there is both an individual and a metaphysical will. For according to Wittgenstein, as stated, one can perceive, not just of the individual subject, but of the entire world as something in which the absolutely valuable manifests itself. That is to say, it is possible to look at the world as a specific constellation of facts – this is the perspective we take in both everyday and scientific discourse - but one can also look beyond the temporal appearance of the world as it happens to be and conceive of it “sub specie aeternitatis.” This is the perspective we take when we

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41 NB 4.11.16; see also TLP 6.422, NB 30.7.16.
42 Ibidem.
44 See TLP 6.45, NB 7.10.16, NB 8.10.16.
contemplate the very meaning of life and the world, for instance in aesthetic or religious contexts.

Now when one takes this perspective, Wittgenstein continues, one can see “that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter”\(^\text{45}\) - indeed, one can see that what matters is not how the world happens to be but that it exists in the first place: “the miracle is that the world exists.”\(^\text{46}\) Put differently, according to the early Wittgenstein, that there is a world - not just this world but any world at all - is of unconditional and absolute value. Given that the existence of the world does not constitute a specific fact but forms a precondition for any fact to occur, it can after all be said to be of more than just relative worth. Quite traditionally, furthermore, Wittgenstein associate the existence of the world with the existence of God: “How things stand is God. God is, how things stand.”\(^\text{47}\) The metaphysical will can thus be said to concern the world in its entirety, conceived of as a manifestation of God’s will.

To come back to the kind of will Wittgenstein considers to be the source of value in the factual world, namely, the individual will, this first and foremost owes its ethical relevance to its standing over and against the metaphysical will. As the Notebooks explain: “The world is given me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there. [...] That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will [...] and what we are dependent on, we can call God.”\(^\text{48}\) According to the picture evoked by Wittgenstein, the human being always already finds itself in a world that is not of its own making, not responsible for how it happens to be yet not able to change the state of the world to any relevant degree either. In combination with the assumption that the existence of the world is inherently valuable, this means that the individual subject, ethically speaking, faces one fundamental choice: she can either accept the world as it is given to her or resist that it is the way that it is. In other words, good and evil enter the worldly realm when the individual willing subject obeys, respectively defies, the will of God. The morally commendable person – or, in Wittgenstein’s words, the happy man – exists in complete harmony with the world, whereas the morally lamentable individual – or the unhappy man – refuses to live in peace with whatever tragedies and amenities life throws his way.\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{45}\) NB 8.7.16.
\(^{46}\) NB 20.10.16; see also TLP 6.44, LE 41-42.
\(^{47}\) NB 1.8.16; see also TLP 6.432, NB 11.6.16, NB 8.7.16. It should however be noted that Wittgenstein’s conception of God is not traditional in the sense that he does not conceive of God as a creator or transcendent being, for instance.
\(^{48}\) NB 8.7.16; see also NB 6.7.16, NB 11.6.16.
\(^{49}\) See NB 5.7.16, NB 6.7.16, NB 8.7.16, NB 29.7.16, NB 30.7.16, NB 13.8.16, TLP 6.43; cf. Stokhof 2002, pp. 216-220. As Stokhof explains (see p. 218), Wittgenstein thus presents life itself as the ultimate ethical task, which explains his rejection of suicide as the elementary sin; see NB 10.1.17.
It can now be clarified how the individual will, which Wittgenstein takes to concur or coincide with our doings and sayings, both for not preceding them and for not being directed at anything else, is neither of the same factual nature as human behaviour, nor directed at contingent worldly things – both of which would fly in the face of his trying to explain ethical willing as an absolutely valuable rather than a wholly arbitrary affair.

That the individual will is not directed at anything factual follows from Wittgenstein’s taking ethics to consist, at the most fundamental level, of either conformity or opposition to the will of God as it is manifested in the existence of the world. Or to be more precise, its not being directed at anything factual is what distinguishes the good or happy from the bad or unhappy will. For if being ethical is a matter of accepting the world as it is, the key to the good life is precisely to renounce all desires and attachment to particular things – to end the ongoing struggle to bring this or that state of affairs about and prevent this or that from happening. Wittgenstein observes: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless. I can only make myself independent of the world – and so in a certain sense master it – by renouncing any influence on happenings.”

Only when one no longer wishes for anything, no matter how agreeable or disagreeable, one can genuinely say: “I am doing the will of God.”

That the good will does not concern particular facts is also reflected in the difference it makes in the life of the happy person as opposed to that of the unhappy man. Good willing, not being directed at anything factual, does not change the facts of the world, Wittgenstein explains, it only affects how the world in its totality appears to the individual human being: “If good or evil willing affects the world it can only affect the boundaries of the world, not the facts. […] The world must, so to speak, wax or wane as a whole. As if by accession or loss of meaning.” The happy person, in other words, is able to see the world as a meaningful whole, whereas the life of the unhappy man lacks this ethico-religious quality, no matter how – or precisely because – he struggles to come to terms with the world in which he finds himself. According to Wittgenstein, leading a happy life means being in awe of the world in its entirety, or admiring existence in whatever form it comes.

Moreover, in line with his taking the relationship between cause and effect to be of a non-necessary nature, Wittgenstein holds that happiness is not a specific state of affairs that results from abiding by the will of God, but maintains that it consists of nothing more and nothing less than a life in harmony with the world: “In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what “being happy” means.” Hence, in so far as the individual will has no other object

50 NB 11.6.16; see also NB 6.7.16, NB 8.7.16, NB 29.7.16, NB 13.8.16.
51 NB 8.7.16.
52 NB 5.7.16.
53 NB 8.7.16.
in the world than the actions it concurs with, it is not directed at concrete worldly activities but concerns an entire way of leading one’s life, which does not serve to bring yet another thing about but is a goal in itself. In this respect too, the ethical will does not have particular facts or things as its aim, no matter what Wittgenstein’s equating willing with acting may seem to suggest.

This brings me to the fact that even though Wittgenstein claims that the individual will concurs or coincides with human behaviour, it is not of the same factual and contingent nature as concrete and distinct doings and sayings. For as I just explained, Wittgenstein does not just maintain that the will is an attitude of the subject to the world as a whole rather than to particular facts, he also takes ethical willing to be an attitude of the subject to the world in the sense of concerning an individual’s entire way of life. This means that when Wittgenstein identifies willing with acting, he does not have isolated activities in mind but is thinking of someone’s doings and sayings in so far as these testify of her general outlook on life and the world. Whether a particular action is good or bad thus depends on the kind of life it is part and parcel of, and the ethical will can, conversely, be said to be an intrinsic part of everything a person says and does. Instead of being fact-like itself, the individual will rather forms the ethico-religious dimension of human behaviour.

To recapitulate my reading so far, being (im)moral is, on Wittgenstein’s view, thus a matter of the way in which someone leads her life, which explains why he situates the bearer of ethico-religious worth - the individual ethical will - in human behaviour. And as a result, Wittgenstein is justified in claiming that good and evil have a place in the world, even though he maintains that worldly events as such are ethically neutral. He after all takes good and evil to be inherently connected to our doings and sayings, that take place in the worldly realm. The strict distinction he supports between fact and value however also forbids Wittgenstein from identifying willing and acting all the way through. He accordingly does not equate the will with any concrete doings and sayings but takes it to be the ethical dimension of human conduct: a quality that only becomes apparent when one looks at a particular activity from the perspective of someone’s entire life and when one moreover conceives of this life as a testament to the will of God rather than a concrete succession of facts. This is how Wittgenstein explains how willing pertains to the world without being of the world.

Hence, to come back again to the example discussed several times already, while Wittgenstein cannot account for the immorality of a murder by pointing to a person’s intentions or the consequences of her acts, he does not lack the means to explain what is wrong about the wilful taking of another’s life. According to the account laid out in his early writings, such an act would testify of an outlook on life that does not respect existence in whatever form it comes, as a morally good person would. However, while Wittgenstein is thus able to accommodate the immorality of a murder – and even apart from the fact that one might still disagree
with his exact explanation – the account of ethics he offers does not seem to provide much guidance in situations that are not a matter of life or death. After all, cases concerning someone’s or something’s existence as such do not exhaust the instances that call for an ethical choice or evaluation; a moral dilemma might also concern the quality of a life, for instance. In so far as Wittgenstein has anything to say about such cases, he explicitly advises to live in peace with whatever conditions one finds oneself in. He is likewise silent at best and perhaps dismissive in fact about any duty we might have towards the well-being of others; his plea not to try and bend the world to one’s needs and desires seems to hold just as must for the needs and desires of other men. It could be asked whether an account that does not treat some of the most vital and complex ethical issues, and takes an unduly general and rigid view to the extent that it does treat thereof, still counts as viable theory of ethics.

The answer to that question should probably be “No” – yet while a scholar in moral theory will most likely be unsettled by such criticism, it is unlikely to upset the early Wittgenstein. It should be noted that the famous final statement of the Tractatus can be read, not as ruling out all talk and reflection on subjects like ethics whatsoever, but as more specifically warning against the theorizing about these things. Wittgenstein maintains that ethics and related affairs, not being of a factual nature, do not lend themselves to such technical treatment. He consigns the ethico-religious to the domain of the unspeakable to safeguard it from what he takes to be a dangerous and disrespectful approach, and will therefore consider the claim that he does not offer a viable ethical theory to be praise rather than critique. Moreover, the possible unsatisfactoriness of his account might also have to do with the fact that Wittgenstein is not so much interested in providing a measuring rod for assessing the morality of particular events, as in exploring what it means to be concerned with the meaning of life more generally. Rather than contribution to the customary study of ethics, Wittgenstein’s investigations take up questions pertaining to the topic of religious belief.

54 See NB 29.7.16. Cf. Stokhof 2002, pp. 232-234. Stokhof tries to ease the worries that Wittgenstein’s outlook leads to a fatalistic attitude with no room for active involvement with others. As he explains, Wittgenstein holds that the distinction between individual selves should, on the fundamental ethical level, be abandoned, which implies that one’s liberation from the world is necessarily tied to the liberation of others. However, a dissolution in the metaphysical will will only be experienced as a liberation by those who share the early Wittgenstein’s ideas about life and the world. In so far as a person is unimpressed by them, this is also where engagement à la Wittgenstein comes to a halt again.

55 This is also how Wittgenstein explained his verdict vis-à-vis ethical theory to Wiener Kreis member Friedrich Waismann; cf. Waismann 1984, pp. 116-117; cf. Stokhof 2002, pp. 211-212. That (scientific) theorizing is antithetical to the ethico-religious is an insight that can be encountered in all of Wittgenstein’s religious writings, as will become clear in the sections to follow.
Put differently, it can be argued that Wittgenstein is not only not intent on offering a theory of ethics, he can also be said not to be concerned with what conventionally goes by the name of ethics at all. And as an exploration of religiosity rather than a theory of morality, Wittgenstein’s remarks are perhaps less susceptible to reservations such as those I have expressed just now. Most importantly, however – and to come back to my reason for consulting Wittgenstein’s religious thoughts in the first place - the account of religiosity that can be formulated on the basis of his early writings does not seem to be at odds with the critique of Cartesianism formulated in his philosophy of psychology.

Indeed, even if the Tractarian claim that thoughts and feelings are worldly events among others stands in contrast to his later being “not that hard up for categories” when it comes to accommodating the mental, there is a continuity in Wittgenstein’s thinking about mind in so far as both his earlier and his later writings dismiss the need for a private Cartesian realm in order to account for psychological phenomena. According to the Tractarian ontology, as stated, the postulation of an unchanging Cartesian-style container for thoughts and feelings is neither acceptable nor necessary; the soul in that sense does not exist. In line with these principles, the early Wittgenstein does not situate religious belief in an inner space that only the believer has access to. On my reading of the Tractatus, the Notebooks and the Lecture on Ethics, he takes religiosity to be a matter of a person’s outlook on life as it is manifested in her worldly activities. In complete resonance with the later Wittgenstein’s explaining mental matters in terms of aspects of the human being, the early Wittgenstein holds that a person’s ethico-religious views have their life as a specific aspect or dimension of her conduct.

Hence, even though Wittgenstein at one point describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of “the interplay of forces within,” his writings on religion so far do not conflict with his embodied and embedded account of subjectivity. That is to say, his early writings on religion are compatible with his later writings on the nature of man in that the former locate religiosity on the outside rather than the inside of the subject. In contrast to his psychological writings, however, Wittgenstein’s religious remarks do not just take belief to be manifested in a certain conglomerate of (contextualized shades of) behaviour - they present religiosity as a dimension of everything a person says and does. Moreover, while his philosophy of psychology argues that a person’s (contextualized shades of) behaviour only makes for manifestations of hope or grief when it is taken to be an instance of a larger cultural pattern, in the context of the early Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion it is the individual believer’s life that forms the background against which her particular doings and sayings should be seen. In other words,

56 RPPii 690; cf. p. 74 of this study. But then again, the Tractarian ontology does not imply that all worldly events are of the same empirical nature; that it holds psychological phenomena to be worldly events among others therefore does not automatically amount to a form of reductionism.
57 CV 33a.
although the term “aspect” can be used to explain both Wittgenstein’s later account of subjectivity and his early account of religiosity, not all elements of the latter seem to have a counterpart in the former.

However — and apart from the fact that this need not mean that Wittgenstein’s writings on religion stand in an outright contradiction to his thoughts on subjectivity — final conclusions as to the compatibility of these two parts of his oeuvre cannot be drawn before other remarks belonging to Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion have been consulted as well. In the next section, I will investigate what account of religiosity can be extracted from the observations nowadays known as the Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”. These remarks are of a much later date than the Notebooks and the Tractatus - though the first part was written only two years after the Lecture on Ethics - and, in contrast to the early writings, do not so much discuss religious belief as it is manifested in a person’s entire way of life but investigate specific, supra-individual religious activities, namely, the rituals that human beings perform all over the world and have performed throughout the ages. Consulting the Remarks on Frazer can thus only deepen one’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s view on religiosity.

4.3 “Such actions may be called Instinct-actions”

While Sir James George Frazer was considered to be the embodiment of the way anthropology should not be conducted by the time he died in 1941, the classicist-turned-anthropologist was highly influential in an earlier stage of his career, and not just among academics. A lifelong fellow of the same Cambridge college Wittgenstein was affiliated with, Frazer owed his fame and notoriety primarily to a study called The Golden Bough. This book starts out as an attempt to understand a ritual concerning priesthood that used to take place in the grove of Diana near Nemi, a village not far from Rome. Its title derives from a Turner painting depicting a scene from the Aeneid, in which Aeneas is told that the offering of a golden bough will guarantee him safe passage through the underworld - and according to Frazer, Turner sets it in that very grove. Yet while Turner presents “a dream-like vision” of the Nemi surroundings, Frazer explains, “In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy.”

For according to the rule of the Diana sanctuary, “A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.”

58 The following exposition on Frazer and The Golden Bough draws mainly on Ackerman 1994. What made Frazer’s work outdated was that he did not do any field work himself; his descriptions relied on the accounts of others, from classical authors to missionaries he specifically consulted. Gradually, this type of “library anthropology” came to be regarded as inappropriate.
60 Ibidem.
The Golden Bough however does not only deal with this particular rite. Frazer’s desire to comprehend the why and wherefore of such a “barbarous custom” lead him to recount numerous other rituals, including those that were practiced in Europe’s rural areas in Frazer’s own days. As a result, The Golden Bough continuously expanded. It consisted of two volumes when it was first published in 1890 but grew to three volumes in 1900 and to no less than twelve in 1911-14. This did not make Frazer’s study any less popular (though the appearance of an abbreviated, one-volume edition in 1923 may have helped). Readers delighted in its description of both more and less exotic customs, but what attracted – and/or appalled - people most was the message that, though nowhere made explicit, made itself felt throughout the book. For while Frazer only discussed ancient and pagan rituals, it was clear that he meant his analysis to apply to the Christian religion too. He maintained that both pre-Christian magic and Christianity constitute attempts to understand the workings of the world. With the advancement of modern science, however, a much better way to explain these has become available. Hence, Frazer suggests, just as Christianity by and large replaced its heathen predecessors, it will itself be superseded by science, which offers by far superior means to understand and influence the world. What begins as an investigation into Nemi priesthood thus ends as a theory about the evolution of mankind.

As his friend and pupil Maurice O’Drury recalls, Wittgenstein had long wanted to read The Golden Bough; in 1931, he asked Drury to get hold of a copy in order to be able to go through the book together. Drury borrowed the first volume of Frazer’s work from the library and discussed it with Wittgenstein over the course of several weeks. The first part of the Remarks on Frazer stems from this period. The second part of the remarks probably dates back to 1948 and is based on the abbreviated edition of The Golden Bough, of which Wittgenstein received a copy in 1936. This second encounter does not seem to have brought Wittgenstein to change his mind about Frazer, but that does not mean that the collective remarks on the latter’s book form one coherent whole. That is to say, The Golden Bough prompted Wittgenstein to raise a number of issues and the Remarks on Frazer accordingly encompass several strands of thought. Even though it is – characteristically - not always possible to sharply distinguish between the questions he addresses, Wittgenstein can for instance be said to ask: What is so fascinating about the rituals that Frazer describes and what is the best way to come to terms with that fascination? To what extent are examinations into the historical origins of a rite relevant to the understanding thereof and might a non-causal explanation

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61 Idem, p. 3.
63 Drury 1981b, p. 119.
65 This is the main focus of Cioffi 1998.
in the form of a perspicuous representation not be at least as informative? What does the occurrence of rituals all over the world and throughout the ages tell us about the human form of life?

In what follows, I will not discuss the answers that Wittgenstein develops to these particular questions but will confine myself to one other question that Frazer’s study prompted him to ask, namely: Should we really perceive of primitive magic as a form of science, and a bad form of science at that? For not unlike many readers of *The Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein primarily had his doubts about the book because of its portrayal of religion as both on a par with and wholly replaceable by scientific activity.

According to Frazer, to explain his account of rites and religion in a little more detail, some of the seemingly irrational and even outright disturbing behaviour of pre-secular man – such as the sprinkling of water on the ground in times of great drought and the sticking of pins in a doll made in the image of his enemy – becomes more intelligible once one realizes that the primitive, unacquainted with the blessings of modern science, is at the mercy of nature’s whims. In order to make his life not too uncomfortable or stay alive in the first place, pre-modern man has to find a way to control the forces confronting him. He accordingly postulates several basic principles by means of which he tries to understand the workings of the world, and subsequently applies these to the problems he encounters. Putting to work the law of similarity, for instance, according to which “any effect may be produced by imitating it,” he scatters drops of water on the dried-out soil, assuming that it will cause the rain to fall. Nowadays we know, Frazer continues, that such attempts are wholly futile, but pre-secular man has not yet acquired the same understanding of the world. And looked at as a form of proto-scientific activity, we can at least begin to understand why human beings have engaged (and sometimes still engage) in ritualistic behaviour: it is not entirely irrational but simply constitutes a misguided attempt to understand and control the world around us.

*The Golden Bough* thus explains religious belief as a system of false hypotheses about the workings of nature, put into practice through rites and rituals. According to Frazer, in other words, rituals originate from a proto- or quasi-scientific theory and form the instruments by means of which pre-modern man vainly tries to manipulate the world. Judging by the *Notebooks*’ and *Tractatus*’ claims that human conduct may be the instrument of the wish but not of the ethico-religious will, and that religion does not lend itself to theoretical treatment, it should come as no surprise that the *Remarks on Frazer* take issue with Frazer’s account of religious

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66 Cf. Baker & Hacker 2005, pp. 261-262. They cite RFGB 133a as the origin of PI 122 - though it could thus be very interesting to see if RFGB can shed more light on the exact aim and nature of the Wittgensteinian approach, I will only consult it for the light it may shed on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion.


belief and ritualistic behaviour. Wittgenstein holds that Frazer’s view is highly unsatisfactory, stating: “it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity.”69 He tries to bring out the implausibility of Frazer’s explanation by pointing to two oversights that can be attributed to the latter.

In claiming that the primitive performs rituals as a result of a false theory of nature, as Wittgenstein first of all brings to attention, Frazer seems to have left a large part of pre-secular life out of consideration. That is to say, if his study would have included descriptions of (so-called) primitive behaviour on normal, non-ceremonial occasions, Frazer might not have drawn the same conclusions. For the same person who puts pins in an image of his enemy, seemingly with the intention of killing him, does not cobble together a miniature house assuming that this will eventually yield him a home, and tribes who pray to a Rain King only do so right before the rain period, never in the months “in which the land is “a parched and arid desert”.”70 On Wittgenstein’s view, this goes to show that voodoo rituals and rain making ceremonies, among others, are not a matter of misguided science put into practice, or a matter of science put into practice tout court. For if ritual behaviour would result from a theory about the workings of the world, one would expect this theory to underlie all of a person’s worldly dealings.71 That this is not the case means that it is Frazer, rather than pre-modern man, to whom a false view can be attributed – a false view of rituals and religion, that is. According to Wittgenstein, and pace Frazer: “the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false.”72

But there is another oversight that can be attributed to Frazer, the correction of which similarly shows his conclusions about the instrumental and theoretical character of rites and religion to be mistaken. For in claiming that the primitive performs rituals as a result of a false theory of nature, Frazer also seems to have overlooked the similarities between pre-secular and modern life. Many of the activities we (so-called) moderns perform can after all be said to be of a ritualistic or ceremonial nature too. Wittgenstein himself, in any case, sometimes beats the ground with his walking stick when he is mad, or compresses his lips when a person in his company laughs too much, he confesses.73 However, he never does so because he assumes that such actions will have an effect on the things he is upset or annoyed about. Similarly, a person who kisses the picture of an absent lover does not do so on the basis of a theory about the relationship between pictures and lovers. Hence, even if clear-cut church ceremonies, for instance, no

69 RFGB 119d.
70 RFGB 137b; see also RFGB 121b, RFGB 125a.
72 RFGB 129b; see also RFGB 199d, RFGB 123g&amp;.
73 See RFGB 137c, RFGB 141a.
longer play an important role in modern-day existence,\textsuperscript{74} our lives cannot be said to be wholly devoid of rituals, yet we would not for a moment think of saying that the (bigger or smaller) rituals we perform have their roots in theoretical contemplation. Why should this be any different for the primitive who puts pins in an image of his enemy or sprinkles water over dried-out soil?\textsuperscript{75} Again, Wittgenstein’s conclusions contradict \textit{The Golden Bough}’s: “Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one’s beloved. That is \textit{obviously not} based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents.”\textsuperscript{76}

According to Wittgenstein, then, Frazer takes a too narrow perspective on the ritualistic behaviour of pre-secular man, failing to take both the connection to the rest of primitive existence and the connection to the life of modern man into account. A broader, less prejudiced view might have prevented him from describing rites and rituals as manifestations of quasi- or proto-science and thus from suggesting that all religious activity is performed out of stupidity. For particular doings and sayings are only eligible for qualifications such as “correct” and “erroneous” or “accurate” and “mistaken” when they are part of a theory purporting to explain the way the world is, Wittgenstein states. Not originating from such empirical speculation, rituals cannot be said to be misguided either: “No \textit{opinion} serves as the foundation for a religious symbol. And only an opinion can involve an error.”\textsuperscript{77} Frazer is wrong to describe rituals and religion as a flawed and expendable form of science because he is wrong to describe it as a form of science to begin with.

Still determined to safeguard religious belief from what he takes to be an unsuitable and disrespectful approach, there is a clear continuity between Wittgenstein’s arguments in the \textit{Remarks on Frazer} and his claims in the \textit{Notebooks}, \textit{Tractatus} and \textit{Lecture on Ethics}; a strict distinction between fact and value seems to inform all of these writings. Similar to the early Wittgenstein’s stating that in so far as behaviour is the site of the absolutely valuable, it cannot stand in a causal or instrumental relation to the ethico-religious will, he argues against Frazer’s explaining rituals as the means through which primitive man hopes to manipulate the course of nature. And similar to the Tractarian claim that one must not attempt to theorize about matters that do not belong to the factual domain, Wittgenstein takes Frazer to task for describing religious belief as a system of hypotheses about the workings of the world. It may however be wondered whether the continuity between the early writings and the \textit{Remarks on Frazer} goes all the way. That is to say, whereas the early Wittgenstein maintains that the (im)morality of human conduct

\textsuperscript{74} And whether this is true depends on one’s definition of “modern”. That is to say, contrary to claims that we now live in a wholly secular age, religion is far from absent from many people’s lives, including those living in so-called secular countries.

\textsuperscript{75} Cf. Clack 1999, pp. 62-63; Clack 2001, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{76} RFGB 123j.

\textsuperscript{77} RFGB 123g; see also RFGB 119c, RFGB 125e, RFGB 129b. Note that Wittgenstein’s objections to O’Hara in LRB rest on the same premise; I will discuss them in the next section.
depends on the outlook on life it is part and parcel of, some of his objections to Frazer suggest that he came to consider religious behaviour as not being based on anything at all.

In response to The Golden Bough's overly intellectualistic interpretation of ritualistic behaviour, Wittgenstein explores what reasons people might have for the performance of rituals if such behaviour cannot be said to spring from an attempt to understand and control nature. And as he observes, when a person kisses the picture of her beloved or sprinkles water over dried-out soil, she does not seem to have any reason or goal in mind; someone engaged in ritualistic behaviour perhaps simply gives vent to the feelings that human existence and the circle of life give rise to. A person sprinkling water over dried-out soil can be said to manifest, not a theory of nature, but human hope or despair, and a person kissing a picture of her beloved can similarly be said to express love or yearning, nothing more and nothing less. Hence, Wittgenstein suggests that rituals have no other goal than the channelling of emotions, if that can be called an (intentional) goal in the first place: “It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.” Instead of claiming that rituals have their roots in a theory of nature, Wittgenstein continues, “Such actions may be called Instinct-actions.”

Given Wittgenstein's objections to Frazer, this alternative formulation makes perfect sense, since it overcomes both flaws of the latter’s account. It not only underscores the non-theoretical nature of rites and rituals but also places them in a much more plausible or favourable light: conceived of as expressions of basic human emotions or celebrations of the course of life, one would think twice before suggesting that rituals are performed out of sheer stupidity. However, if this expressivist account of ritualistic behaviour would be the final analysis Wittgenstein places over and against that of Frazer, the Remarks on Frazer would also contradict his own earlier work, no matter what continuities may otherwise exist. For such an expressivist account implies that when a person engages in rites and rituals, she simply acts for the sake of acting; the Notebooks and Tractatus,
by contrast, emphatically claim that willing cannot completely coincide with acting. Whereas some of the Remarks on Frazer suggest that rituals do not serve any higher purpose than the venting of all-too human emotions, the earlier writings maintain that a person’s doings and sayings are always already indicative of her general outlook on life. Or, perhaps it would be too strong to say that Wittgenstein’s discussion of The Golden Bough contradicts his early work. Depending on what emotions they channel in response to what events or states of affairs, rituals may after all manifest the very perspective the Notebooks, Tractatus and Lecture on Ethics describe. Even so, the Remarks on Frazer nowhere argue that particular doings and saying only qualify as religious behaviour when they are part and parcel of a particular perspective on human existence or existence as such.

To be sure, if there is a difference or discrepancy between his earlier and his subsequent work, this may simply mean that Wittgenstein gradually distanced himself from his initial ideas on religion, but there are also other Remarks on Frazer indicating that the claim that ritualistic actions are instinct actions, need not be taken to sum up the complete and final account offered there. Wittgenstein for instance observes, as stated, that “the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion,” but he immediately continues “although an opinion – a belief – can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite.”\textsuperscript{81} Similarly, in response to Frazer’s explanation of why the Nemi priest must be killed by a stronger and craftier successor, Wittgenstein does not simply object that rituals have no cognitive component whatsoever, but less uncompromisingly states: “where that practice and these views occur together, the practice does not spring from the view, but they are both just there.”\textsuperscript{82} Rather than claiming that ritualistic behaviour cannot have anything to do with views or attitudes, these remarks take issue with Frazer’s prioritizing thinking over acting when it comes to religious belief – and a specific type of thinking at that.

Judging by the entries just quoted, it seems that even though Wittgenstein fundamentally disagrees with Frazer’s analysis of rites and religion, he does not therefore embrace an account that is the polar opposite thereof. After all, that rituals do not spring from a theory of nature does not mean that they cannot manifest anything but the feelings a person once in a while needs to get off her chest. This suggests that the claim that ritualistic actions are instinct actions should be read, not as constituting the end-point of Wittgenstein’s discussion, but as one of the possibilities he explores in his attempt to show Frazer wrong.\textsuperscript{83} Or, instead of summing up what the Remarks on Frazer unambiguously take to be the essence of religious behaviour, the instinct remark can be said to emphasize how rites and rituals should, according to Wittgenstein, under no condition be explained. That

\textsuperscript{81} RFGB 129b.
\textsuperscript{82} RFGB 119d.
\textsuperscript{83} Cioffi even calls this remark hyperbolic (see Cioffi 1998, p. 156), suggesting that Wittgenstein may have let his disagreement with Frazer get the better of him at this point.
would place it optimally in line with both the earlier writings on religion and other Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”.

Being the main candidate for a slogan-like illustration of Wittgenstein’s alternative view, it would also mean that the discussion of Frazer is primarily aimed at understanding what is wrong about the idea that rites have their roots in empirical theory - not at developing a different account of the relationship between religious belief and religious behaviour.

Hence, to summarize my reading of Wittgenstein’s religious writings up to this point, the Remarks on Frazer give a similar negative characterization of religious belief and religious behaviour as the Notebooks, the Tractatus and the Lecture on Ethics, denying that believers subscribe to a theory about empirical facts they put into practice with the aim of manipulating the world around them. Unlike the earlier writings, however, the Remarks on Frazer do not contain a clear account of how religiosity should be conceived of instead.

On the face of it, then, his discussion of The Golden Bough neither refutes nor confirms whether Wittgenstein explains religious belief, like (other) psychological phenomena, as an aspect of the human being. But then again, the Remarks on Frazer could also be said to indeed be consistent with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology in that it – unlike the earlier writings - takes rituals to form recognizable patterns of behaviour, even if it is not made explicit in the text. Many of Wittgenstein’s objections to Frazer are after all based on the assumption that we are able (or should at least be able) to identify specific pre-secular doings and sayings as ritualistic actions, distinguish them from other kinds of pre-secular activity and compare them to distinctive behaviour displayed by modern man. This suggests that Wittgenstein, at least at the time of reading The Golden Bough, holds religious belief to be manifested in certain broad reactive prefigurations, just like psychological phenomena such as gratitude and grief.

From this perspective, the Remarks on Frazer actually add to and modify our understanding of the compatibility between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology and his philosophy of religion, rather than remaining silent on that matter. For according to the interpretation offered in the previous section, it is the single believer’s entire life that forms the background against which her doings and saying must be seen, which does not seem to be wholly in line with Wittgenstein’s later account of the mental. The Remarks on Frazer on the other hand suggest that Wittgenstein came to locate religious belief – like psychological phenomena in general – in supra-individual patterns of behaviour. On such an account, there are

84 Hence, while I agree with other interpreters that Wittgenstein cannot be ascribed an expressivist account of ritualistic behaviour, I have other reasons for denying this. Unlike Cioffi, for instance, I do not think that it is only a certain discrepancy within RFGB that should make us wary of saying it defends an expressivist view (see Cioffi 1998, pp. 155-182); unlike Clack, I do not think that the main contradiction to be avoided is that between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion and his philosophy of language (see Clack 2001, pp. 19-21); and unlike Philips and Ashdown, I do not think that Wittgenstein cannot be attributed an expressivist account because he never offers constructive accounts to begin with (see Philips 2003, pp. 195-200; Ashdown 2004, pp. 145-151).
specific activities by means of which the believer can be distinguished from the non-believer, and the background against which they become visible is not a strictly individual one.

Again, however, it is too early to draw final conclusions. Even apart from the fact that the Remarks on Frazer do not explicitly claim that religious belief should be situated in the interspace between a community of subjects, other of his religious writings wait to be discussed, and I will have a look at the Lectures on Religious Belief in the next section. And indeed, whereas the Remarks on Frazer apparently offer an account of religiosity that is closer to Wittgenstein’s later account of the psyche than the account of religiosity given in the early work, the Lectures on Religious Belief return to the Tractarian idea of religion as an outlook on life again. Whereas some of the Remarks on Frazer seem to deny that religious behaviour has any cognitive component, the Lectures on Religious Belief unambiguously investigate the epistemology of religious doings and sayings.

4.4. “Suppose I say: ‘The man used a picture’ ”

In contrast to the sources I have discussed so far, the Lectures on Religious Belief were not written by Wittgenstein himself: they consist of a collection of notes taken down by his Cambridge students during three lectures he gave on the topic of religious belief. (The course was given in 1938, so seven years after the first part of the Remarks on Frazer was written and ten years before Wittgenstein wrote the second part thereof.) The Lectures do not follow a clearly laid-out trajectory - perhaps because his students did not give a verbatim report of the meetings, perhaps because Wittgenstein did not discuss the topic in a very structured way, and probably because a combination of both. Be that as it may, there is one question that seems to have been on Wittgenstein’s mind during all three meetings: How should we understand the specific and special character, not of belief in general, but of religious belief? His main strategy in answering this question is to contrast religious belief with non- or a-religious beliefs and statements, and to describe the exact differences between them. Similar to his arguing against Frazer that religion cannot be explained as a theory about the workings of nature, the Lectures take on science as one of the main domains or discourses from which religion should be distinguished.

One of the key differences between the religious believer and the scientist, as Wittgenstein indicates at several points, lies in the evidence the former gives – or rather refrains from giving - for the convictions she entertains. The believer will appeal to very different grounds than the scientist, if she will appeals to grounds at all. As an example, Wittgenstein discusses the case of a person who is convinced that there will be a Last Judgement, whose belief therein is unshakable and who
would be willing to risk or forgo everything on account of it. Normally, one would expect that a person who is *that* certain of something’s being or becoming the case, has extraordinarily good grounds for believing what she does. That is far from the case when it comes to religious belief, Wittgenstein observes. While the religious person takes the coming of the Last Judgement to be more true than anything in the world, she may not be able to give reasons for her belief or may rely on evidence that is, by scientific or even everyday standards, “exceedingly flimsy” and “extremely slender.” She could for instance say that a dream informed her about the when and how of Judgement Day, yet “If you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence,” Wittgenstein points out, a dream is not evidence at all; “you can’t credit that anyone could soberly argue: “Well, I had this dream... therefore... Last Judgement”.

This should not be taken to mean, as Wittgenstein is quick to explain to his students, that the religious believer is mistaken or not yet entitled to her conviction, that she should look for further evidence and give up her belief should she find none. Rather than judging religion by scientific standards, one should take it for a fact that religious persons base enormous things on the slightest grounds. It simply means that evidence and experimentation do not play the same role in the religious as in the scientific sphere, if it plays a role in the former sphere at all. When the believer talks about evidence or says that she knows that there will be a Last Judgement, the words “evidence” and “know” have a very different meaning than when they are used in a scientific context: “One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn’t use ‘believe’ as one does ordinarily.” Indeed, when a religious person does approach his convictions scientifically, he misunderstands his own beliefs or mistakenly holds himself for a (truly) religious believer, as Wittgenstein for instance says of Father O’Hara: “I would say, if this is religious

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85 See LRB 53, LRB 54.
86 LRB 58.
87 LRB 61.
88 Idem; see also LRB 54, LRB 60; cf. Clack 1999, pp. 67-68.
89 LRB 59; see also LRB 54, LRB 56, LRB 57. This is of course reminiscent of the observations in OC, where Wittgenstein repeatedly points out that we do not always use the word “know” in the sense of “confirmed after elaborate examination of evidence for and against”. However, even though both OC and LRB subsequently argue that it is not for nothing that certainty and religious belief, respectively, are not based on (scientific) grounds, Wittgenstein appears to give different arguments in both cases. For whereas OC maintains that certainties cannot not be proven because they form the precondition for knowing and investigating things in the first place (see chapter 5 for a more elaborate exposition), LRB states that proving religious convictions is detrimental thereto since they do not concern factual or empirical matters. Schönbaumsfeld uses both arguments in her discussion of LRB (see Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 159-175) - I think that when she states that Wittgenstein (and Kierkegaard) take a scientific approach to religious belief to indicate a “category mistake” or “confusion of the spheres”, she portrays LRB most accurately. This suggests that Wittgenstein did not consider certainties and religious beliefs to be the same kind of thing, yet even if that is true, it is hard to say exactly wherein the difference lies. I will try to say more about this in the second intermezzo.
belief, then it’s all superstition.”\(^{90}\) Far from making it into an (even) more venerable affair, people like O’Hara, who think that evidence for the existence of God or the coming of the Last Judgement can and should be given, violate the very nature of religious belief and can accordingly even be accused of blasphemy.\(^{91}\)

Moreover, that giving scientific grounds and providing empirical tests is antithetical to religious belief does not mean that religion is an irrational affair and that believers are unreasonable. That is to say, it obviously means that religious belief is not a rational matter in the way science is or purports to be, but it cannot for that reason be called irrational either. Anyone claiming that religion is irrational - rather than a-rational - treats it as something that should be based on evidence and experimentation yet refuses to meet these requirements. In other words, she treats it “as a matter of reasonability,”\(^{92}\) whereas that is precisely the stance that true believers do not take towards their convictions, as Wittgenstein is trying to bring to attention. In fact, anyone calling religion irrational is making the same mistake as the (so-called) religious believer who feels that the existence of God or the coming of the Last Judgement should be defended by means of empirical proof: “What seems to me ludicrous about O’Hara is his making it appear to be reasonable.”\(^{93}\) Instead of having a place on either side of the rational-irrational divide, religious belief transcends these qualifications.\(^{94}\)

This raises the question as to what it is about religious belief that excludes it from being called either rational or irrational, and here it is informative to have a look at another contrast Wittgenstein discusses: not that between the religious believer and the scientist, but that between the religious believer and the atheist or agnostic. Wittgenstein invites his students to imagine a conversation in which the one person declares that there will be a Last Judgement, and the other responds by stating “Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.”\(^{95}\)

We would say, he explains, that these people fundamentally differ in opinion, if we would call it a difference in opinion in the first place: we would probably use other terms to describe the difference between them and the sheer magnitude thereof, for instance by saying that they are separated by “an enormous gulf.”\(^{96}\) That is remarkable, Wittgenstein observes, because if these persons would be discussing whether the aeroplane overhead is of French or German manufacture, say, we would not take them to be that far apart, even if the one would be denying the other’s sure conviction that the aeroplane is German, instead of less resolutely responding “I don’t know. Possibly.” For in such a case disagreement or uncertainty is, in principle, quite easy to resolve. The discussants know which

\(^{90}\) LRB 59; see also LRB 56, LRB 61.


\(^{92}\) LRB 58.

\(^{93}\) Ibidem.

\(^{94}\) See LRB 57-58, LRB 58.

\(^{95}\) LRB 53; see also LRB 56.

\(^{96}\) Ibidem.
object is under consideration and only need to have a closer look at it in order to
determine whether it is or is not of German making.

As Wittgenstein then goes on to point out, two persons discussing whether
there will be a Last Judgement have no such thing to fall back on. For when one
person claims that he knows or beliefs that there will be a Day of Judgement, and
the other replies that he does not know or does not think so, the discussants
cannot be said to be speaking of the same object or state of affairs. Wittgenstein
imagines: “[I] give an explanation: ‘I don’t believe in…’, but then the religious
person never believes what I describe.”97 Put differently, the religious believer does
not affirm the existence of a state of affairs of which the atheist in turn denies that
it exists. According to Wittgenstein, as a result, the debate between the believer and
the non-believer cannot be characterized by saying that the latter contradicts the
former, or that the latter believes the opposite to the former.98 And this is not due
to there being unclarity as to what event is under consideration, or about the exact
meaning of the words being used: “In one sense, I understand all he says - the
English words “God” [etc.] I understand. I could say: I don’t believe in this,” and
this would be true, meaning that I haven’t got these thoughts or anything that
hangs together with them. But not that I could contradict the thing.”99 The atheist
or agnostic literally has no-thing to contradict: his exchange with the religious
believer it not about things or events at all, Wittgenstein maintains.100

Similar to his claims in the other writings I have discussed, both early and late,
the Lectures contend that religious belief is not an empirical or factual affair.101 This
explains why Wittgenstein repeatedly tells his students - as he for instance also
argues against Frazer - that religion cannot be judged by scientific standards and
must not be considered to be something that can be proven right or wrong. The
difference between the religious believer and the non-believer, namely, is not a
difference in opinion about a certain state of affairs, the existence or nature of
which can be determined by means of empirical investigation. Instead, it is a
difference between a person who always has the idea of Judgement Day in the
back (or even front) of her mind, and a person who simply never has such

97 LRB 55.
100 Wittgenstein makes the same point in discussing the specific way we approach paintings or
pictures of e.g. God; see LRB 59, LRB 63. As Wittgenstein observes, we do not take “The
creation of Adam”, say - in contrast to pictures of aunts and uncles - to depict real persons or
101 Cf. Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 159-168. Schönbaumsfeld explains that (both Kierkegaard and)
Wittgenstein argue that God is not some super-empirical object, merely quantitatively differing
from ordinary objects. (She also explains that statements like “There is a God” are on a par with
statements like “There are physical objects” – hence the kind of statements Wittgenstein dubs
“certainties”. As stated, I doubt whether religious belief and certainty can be equated. Let me
point out here that if one rephrases “There is a God” as “All there is was created by God”, one
might be less inclined to call it a certainty; “All there is was created by God” after all presupposes
“There are physical objects” itself.)
thoughts. Wittgenstein explains: “Here believing obviously plays much more this role: […] a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it. Here, an enormous difference would be between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just didn’t use it at all.”

Hence, a person making a statement about the Last Judgement is not referring to specific facts or events; she is declaring something about the thoughts or pictures that inspire or haunt her.

To come back to my introductory remarks about the Lectures at the end of the previous section, the difference with the analysis or emphasis in the Remarks on Frazer is unmistakable. That is to say, both collections argue against a scientific interpretation of religion, but whereas the Remarks emphatically underscore the unreflective nature of ritualistic behaviour (at some points a bit too forcefully, perhaps) the Lectures precisely explain religious belief in terms of thoughts and pictures. However, just as Wittgenstein should be said to argue against Frazer’s prioritizing (a certain kind of) thinking over acting, rather than his associating rituals with views or opinions per se, the Lectures cannot be said to present religious belief as a strictly intellectual matter. This becomes clear when we have a closer look at the use Wittgenstein more generally came to make of the term “picture”.

Examining his later writings, one may get the impression that Wittgenstein, while building an elaborate theory of meaning around the notion of picturing in the Tractatus, came to regard pictures as useless or even harmful to philosophy. He for instance repeatedly argues, as was also discussed in chapter 3, that phenomena like remembering and understanding meaning cannot be explained by claiming that the person in casu sees a picture before his mental eye. A picture is by itself an inert item that does not convey what it represents or when it was produced. Even the Lectures on Religious Belief contain an excursus on the futility of appealing to pictures in order to account for certain mental matters.

On a different level, moreover, Wittgenstein warns against the philosophical use of pictures, not as intra-theoretical entities, but as models that shape a philosopher’s entire way of looking at certain things. He famously claims about his Tractarian theory of meaning: “A picture held us captive,” and blames the “preconceived idea of crystalline purity” for much philosophical frustration and - worse still - distortion, as I explicated in chapter 2. Apparently, Wittgenstein wants philosophy to rid itself from pictures entirely.

Be that as it may, he does not only speak with disapproval of the use of pictures, at least not in the latter sense. Discussing the Cartesian notion that humans have souls and that this is the locus of all matters mental, Wittgenstein for instance states: “The picture is there. And I am not disputing its validity in any

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102 LRB 56; see also LRB 54, LRB 55, LRB 71.
103 See LRB 66-68.
104 PI 115.
105 PI 108; see also PI 131.
particular case. – Only I also want to understand the application of the picture.”

Elsewhere he even suggests that pictures can be used to prevent philosophical distortion: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his acceptance of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently. [...] I have changed his way of looking at things.”

Leaving aside what further opportunities this offers for reading Wittgenstein as a constructive rather than an outright anti-philosophical thinker, remarks such these indicate that he considered the employment of pictures to be a fundamental characteristic of the way human beings think, for better or worse. But then what exactly does he take pictures in this sense to be?

Obviously, when Wittgenstein remarks that philosophers or other people use a particular picture, he does not mean to say that they see a certain image before their mental eye. Indeed, in a Wittgensteinian context, pictures should be distinguished from concrete visual items such as images at all times, be they of a mental or of a more tangible kind.

For in the way he uses the term, a picture is not a concrete item that a person perceives or sees before her. Rather than being a particular representation someone passively takes in, a Wittgensteinian picture is a form of representation, a mould or paradigm that influences or determines how a person conceives of a phenomenon in its entirety. Hence, when Wittgenstein observes that somebody is (mis)guided by a picture, he means to say that the person in question is inclined to think and speak of certain things in a particular way – to think and speak of all linguistic utterances as descriptions, say. In such a case, in other words, Wittgenstein uses the term picture, not in order to attribute someone a concrete (mental) image in isolation from her doings and sayings, but in order to underscore that there is a specific structure or unity in all her dealings with a particular category of things. It is in a similar way, to round off this excursus, that Wittgenstein speaks of pictures in the Lectures on Religious Belief.

As I pointed out before discussing the later Wittgenstein’s more general use of the term “picture”, he describes the difference between a person who does and a person who does not believe that there will be a Last Judgement as a difference between someone who always has this idea in the back – or even front - of her

\[106\] PI 423.
\[107\] PI 144.
\[108\] E.g. Genova and Stein precisely try to place Wittgenstein’s method in a more positive light by means of his concept of “picture” (see Genova 1995, pp. 64-74; Stein 1997, pp. 139-157). Genova also explicitly brings this into connection with Wittgenstein’s notion of a perspicuous representation; cf. Genova 1995, pp. 31-36, p. 124.
\[110\] Idem, pp. 142-143.
\[111\] Cf. Putnam 1992, pp. 156-175. Putnam remarks that precisely LRB show that Wittgenstein was not against pictures as such. It should parenthetically be noted that LRB also mentions concrete religious pictures, not just pictures in the paradigmatic sense of the word; see LRB 59, LRB 63. I will however only discuss how pictures as forms of representation (rather than particular representations) play a role in LRB’s account of religiosity.
mind, and a person who simply never has such thoughts. An attempt to explain more clearly what this means can now be made. On Wittgenstein’s view, the believer does not distinguish herself from the non-believer by constantly seeing an image of the Last Judgement before her inner eye, or by continuously thinking of the coming of this event. Rather, the notion of Judgement Day functions as a paradigm or guideline that shapes the believer’s entire approach to a particular phenomenon. Wittgenstein uses the term “picture” to indicate that there is a specific unity or structure in her dealings with certain things; a structure that cannot be observed in the atheist’s or agnostic’s approach thereto.

This does not yet fully explain Wittgenstein’s account of religious belief in the Lectures. It should also be made clear what phenomenon or category of things he takes the picture of Judgment Day to guide or shape. On the basis of the insights already obtained in discussing both the Lectures and Wittgenstein’s other writings on religion, this can however be explicated without much digression. For Wittgenstein is remarkably consistent in arguing that religious belief does not concern specific facts or things. In line with the Tractatus and Notebooks as well as the Remarks on Frazer, the Lectures maintain that religion is, in contrast to science, not a factual affair. Rather than shaping a person’s attitude to a specific worldly phenomenon, Wittgenstein accordingly holds that the picture of Judgement Day influences or determines the believer’s existence as such. Reminiscent of the account given in the earliest writings, the Lectures argue that the religious believer makes the Last Judgement into a “guidance for his life.”112 Hence, by speaking of a picture, Wittgenstein means to say that believer’s existence does not form a mere succession of events but displays a distinctive unity or structure. The idea of there being a Last Judgement, say, places everything he does and undergoes in a specific light and consequently makes his life into a meaningful whole.

The contrast between the Lectures and the Remarks on Frazer, then, is not as big as their respective emphases may suggest. For even though the Lectures explain religious belief in terms of thoughts and pictures, whereas the Remarks precisely explore the unreflective nature of religious behaviour, the former collection of remarks does not present religiosity as a strictly intellectual matter. Applying the later Wittgenstein’s concept of picture to the Lectures on Religious Belief, it becomes clear that he takes the person declaring her belief in Judgement Day to make a statement, not about certain isolated reflections or considerations, but about the very way she leads her life. On Wittgenstein’s analysis, the believer and the non-believer do not differ in opinion about the nature or existence of a certain state of affairs, they differ in the shape or form they give their lives.113 So in so far as one wants to describe the exchange between a person saying that there will be a Last Judgement and another replying “No” or “I don’t know” as a discussion, it is a discussion of a very different kind than a debate about the origin of a crossing

112 LRB 53; see also LRB 54.
aeroplane, say. It could even be argued that a person engaged in a religious
discussion, as opposed to someone involved in a regular debate, most accurately
expresses her opinion or view by showing what life he is leading, not by issuing a
statement that another can subsequently affirm or deny.

In situating religious belief in the form or shape of a person’s existence, the
Lectures indicate, like the Notebooks and the Tractatus, that Wittgenstein does not
take religious belief to be a literally inner event or process. Yet as I explained in the
introduction to this chapter, it is not just the exteriority of Wittgensteinian
religiosity that needs to be investigated in order to determine the compatibility of
his thoughts on religion with his view on the psyche; the sociality of religiosity
needs to be examined as well. And when it comes to this element of his account,
the Lectures diverge from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of psychology in the same
way as the early writings, for here, too, it is the individual believer’s life as a whole
that forms the background against which her doings and sayings should be seen.
The Remarks on Frazer may implicitly suggest that Wittgenstein came to take
religious belief, like mental matters more generally, to be manifested in communal
patterns of behaviour, judging by the Lectures, Wittgenstein’s later account of
religiosity no less differs from his explanation of psychological phenomena than
his earlier account of religious belief.

But there is one more collection of remarks that needs to be consulted in order to
get a full overview of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, namely, Culture and
Value. And some of these remarks explicitly discuss the role of the (religious)
community, unlike the other writings consulted so far. Culture and Value can
accordingly settle the question as to the sociality of Wittgensteinian religiosity and
the compatibility with his philosophy of psychology in this respect.

4.5 “A way of living, or a way of assessing life”

Whereas the other writings consulted up to this point can be said to concern a
(relatively) clear topic or have a (relatively) clear motive, Culture and Value consists
of a selection of remarks of which perhaps the only common trait is that they
where scattered throughout the manuscripts Wittgenstein left behind yet do not
seem to be part of his “regular” philosophical work. (Indeed, unlike the other
sources discussed so far, the remarks collected in Culture and Value were written
between 1914 and 1951 and thus span most of Wittgenstein’s adult life.) In
addition to subjects like music, writing and the spirit of his times, however, quite a
number of Wittgenstein’s contemplations in Culture and Value concern faith and
religion, and it is therefore instructive to have a look at these writings too.

Not surprisingly given that Culture and Value runs parallel to Wittgenstein’s
regular work and covers almost four decades, several of the topics or topoi that
were discussed with regard to his other religious writings, both early and late,
appear in this collection well. Claims as to the categorical difference between science and religion, for instance – a topic that perhaps forms the most consistent factor in Wittgenstein’s religious work – can also be found among the remarks in *Culture and Value*. Here, too, Wittgenstein underscores that religion cannot be considered to be an empirical theory, and argues that since religious believers base enormous things on the slightest grounds, evidence and experimentation cannot be said to play the same role in the religious as in the scientific sphere. He states: “If someone who believes in God looks around and asks: [...] “Where does all this come from?” he is not craving for a (causal) explanation,” and observes: “An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. [...] His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it is really possible to walk on it.”

What is more, in addition to once more bringing the anti-theoretical strand in Wittgenstein’s religious thinking to attention, *Culture and Value* confirms my provisional conclusions about the exteriority of Wittgensteinian religiosity – in spite of the fact that the remark quoted in the preceding intermezzo, in which Wittgenstein describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of “the interplay of forces within,” belongs to this very collection of contemplations. For other *Culture and Value* entries situate religious belief, like the remarks in the *Notebooks*, the *Tractatus* and the *Lectures*, in the believer’s existence rather than a private inner realm. As Wittgenstein explains: “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.” This reaffirms that Wittgenstein takes religiosity to reside in the unity or structure observable in the believer’s doings and sayings.

Indeed, in *Culture and Value*, too, it is the notion of religious belief as a matter of the form or shape one gives one’s existence that informs Wittgenstein’s anti-theoretical outlook. He declares: “I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change our life. (Or the direction of your life.)” As remarks such as these make clear, it is not merely because religious belief does not concern specific facts or things that it cannot be explained in theoretical terms. Wittgenstein conversely holds that a theory does not come close to a religious conviction because it does not have the same ethical or existential impact: “The point is that a sound doctrine need not take hold of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor’s prescription. – But here you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction.” No doctrine or theory, Wittgenstein maintains, accounts for the believer’s willingness to lead his entire life in the light of the Last Judgement, say.

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114 CV 85d; see also CV 28a, CV 30a, CV 53c, CV 53e, CV 63g, CV 72a, CV 81a.
115 CV 73e; see also CV 29b, CV 31d, CV 32c, CV 32e, CV 85e, CV 86a.
116 CV 33a; cf. pp. 99-100 of this study.
117 CV 64d; see also CV 32c, CV 61c; cf. Clack 1999, p. 55.
118 CV 53c; see also CV 53d, CV 53e, CV 56f, CV 81a.
Culture and Value thus reaffirms that Wittgensteinian religiosity is neither a theoretical nor a literally inner affair. Like the other works discussed so far, it shows that Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion does not contradict his situating psychological phenomena on the outside rather than the inside of the subject. However, it also confirms the conclusion that suggested itself after reading the Tractatus, Notebooks and Lecture on Ethics, namely, that Wittgenstein does not more precisely locate religiosity in the interspace between a community of subjects. Culture and Value, too, indicates that when it comes to the sociality of religious belief, the compatibility between Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion and his view on the psyche no longer holds - in spite of what his discussion of The Golden Bough may suggest. For while the Remarks on Frazer seem to draw on the analysis of psychological phenomena as located in supra-individual patterns of behaviour, albeit in an implicit way, Culture and Value flatly appears to deny that religiosity is ever a matter of mirroring and echoing the doings and sayings of other human beings. Or, like the Remarks on Frazer it acknowledges the existence of broad reactive prefigurations of a religious nature, but whereas the former collection aims to safeguard such patterns from theoretical (over)interpretation, several of the Culture and Value entries state that in so far as religiosity resides in a person’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour, her being a true believer can under no circumstances be equated to her taking part in pre-existing religious practices.

Indeed, according to a 1930 entry, “Everything ritualistic (everything that, as it were, smacks of the high priest) must be strictly avoided, because it immediately turns rotten.”¹²⁰ That is to say, as Wittgenstein immediately qualifies this bold statement, rituals are not objectionable as such, but only ritualistic behaviour that is sincere rather than empty and automatic can be said to be acceptable. Or to put it in the terminology of his religion-as-a-way-of-life account, only when rituals genuinely mark the direction of a person’s existence can they be taken to be expressions of religious belief. Considered in isolation, therefore, ritualistic behaviour does not yet give insight into a person’s being or not being religious. Moreover, since Wittgenstein takes religiosity to reside in the unity or structure of a life in its entirety rather than specific doings and sayings, it follows from his analysis that a person does not need to perform any rituals in order to be eligible for the epithet “believer”.

The same holds for strictly verbal expressions of belief, according to Wittgenstein. As he contends in a remark from 1950, it is not just those making use of customary religious words and phrases who can be called religious believers. Religiosity is not so much a matter of the words a person uses on particular occasions as of “the difference they make at various points in your life,”¹²¹ Wittgenstein explains. What a person means when he says that he believes in God or the Trinity depends on how he forms or shapes his life around these notions - if

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¹²⁰ CV 8a.
¹²¹ CV 85d; cf. Drury 1981b, p. 129.
he forms or shapes his life around them at all. Hence, using the same terms as people who are usually considered (or consider themselves) to be pre-eminently religious, does not yet make someone into a religious believer. And a result, Wittgenstein observes, “A theology which insist on the use of certain particular words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer.”

Theologians thinking that they can place such demands on the believer misunderstand the nature of religion just as much as those who try to justify their religious convictions by means of empirical proof.

Now to be sure, that there is no list of necessary and sufficient conditions a person has to meet before she can be called a religious believer, and that more than just concrete doings and sayings have to be taken into account before her religiosity (or lack thereof) can be discerned, does not yet mean that Wittgenstein’s analysis of religious belief is at odds with analysis of the mental in general. Far from it, for as I explained in chapter 3, he takes the same to hold for psychological phenomena such as gratitude and grief. Even so, *Culture and Value*’s account of religious belief does not exactly fit the framework Wittgenstein develops in his philosophy of psychology.

With regard to religiosity, Wittgenstein does not just claim that people may manifest the same phenomenon by means of somewhat different conglomerates of (contextualized shades of) behaviour, he seems to hold that believers need not share any doings and sayings whatsoever. That is to say, given that religious belief concerns the way in which a person leads her life, an onlooker is by no means prevented from ever recognizing believers and distinguishing them from non-believers – Wittgenstein in any case feels that he is perfectly able to make such distinctions himself. However, it seems that he takes evidence for the ascription of religiosity to be even more ambiguous and dispersed than evidence for the ascription of ordinary mental matters. When it comes to religious belief, the third person may not only lack familiar patterns to fall back on, he also needs to take a person’s entire way of living into account. In this respect, too, Wittgenstein’s explanation of religiosity differs from his explanation of the psyche, for even though he also claims that it depends on the context which phenomena are expressed by what words and deeds, and “context” is an open-ended term, in his philosophy of psychology he does not use it in the sense of “a person’s entire life”. Yet that is precisely what the term “context” appears to mean when it comes to the background against which the believer’s doings and sayings must be seen.

The contrast between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology and his philosophy of religion becomes even clearer when we consult the remarks that address the upbringing of the religious believer. Indeed, Wittgenstein’s religious contemplations already differ from his psychological writings – or his later writings as such, for that matter - in that they hardly pay attention to the way children are.

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122 Ibidem.
123 Cf. pp. 60-61 of this study.
trained to use certain words and display certain behaviour. Of the sources discussed thus far, only the *Lectures on Religious Belief* mention what children are taught (and forbidden) regarding the religious sphere. Wittgenstein explains that he learned to use religious images very differently from pictures of relatives, as well as that adults did not allow him to question the existence of God - whereas questions about the existence of other facts or things were not greeted with such disapproval, and he was never given proof for there being a Deity either. Yet while these observations serve to underscore once more that religion does not concern facts or things and cannot be judged by scientific standards, the *Lectures* do not trace the influence of a person's upbringing on the eventual direction of her life, like Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology does for a person's manifestations of gratitude or grief, say.

Some of the remarks collected in *Culture and Value* do examine the connection between a person's upbringing and the way she ends up giving meaning to her life, and judging by these entries, the lack of attention for scenes and processes of instruction signals a qualitative rather than a quantitative difference between Wittgenstein's religious writings and his psychological work. For whereas the latter argue that it is, for a large part of one's psychological repertoire, indispensable to learn to take part in pre-existing practices, *Culture and Value* states that the religious believer need not make anything concerning her elders' convictions her own.

That is to say, Wittgenstein maintains that to the extent religious belief is passed on from the one generation to the next, this does not proceed in an automatic fashion and has no predetermined outcome. All instructors can and should do is describe what direction they give their lives, what paradigm they use and why. This would have to result, Wittgenstein explains, “in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference.” A religious upbringing should thus be aimed at the novice's voluntarily and wholeheartedly choosing to embrace a particular system or structure. However, given that the main criterion for a proper religious instruction is, according to Wittgenstein, the pupil's making her own unreserved choice, an upbringing of this kind cannot be said to have failed when she chooses to embrace a different system of reference. Contrary to a child learning to participate in her community's psychological practices, the choice is up to the individual herself. Indeed, Wittgenstein suggests that no special guidance is needed for a person to become a religious believer to begin with: “Life can educate one to a belief in God.”

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124 See LRB 59-60.
125 As will become clear in chapter 5, this can in fact also be said to hold for the passing on of pre-existing practices in general. That is to say, I will argue that while the conveyance of certainties does proceed in a more or less automatic fashion, the outcome of this process is not given in advance either.
126 CV 64d; see also CV 81a.
127 CV 86a.
4.6 Concluding remarks

I consulted Wittgenstein’s religious writings with the aim of investigating to what extent critics are correct in claiming that its rethinks reformulate Cartesianism in such a way that they leave us with no coherent account of the thinking and feeling human being whatsoever. As I explained in the intermezzo preceding this chapter, commentators like Frank and Murdoch take this to be the upshot of the critique of Cartesianism, and moreover take this to mean that it spells the end of all possible ethics. I argued that this conclusion does not automatically follow, even if the underlying reading of post-Cartesianism is correct, but I proposed to first investigate its exegetical validity nonetheless because it also provides an opportunity for fleshing out the ramifications of the claim that the subject’s materiality and sociality are essential to it. And as I pointed out, Wittgenstein’s religious writing constitute excellent testing ground because they clearly indicate arguing that religious belief is not manifested in supra-individual patterns and even suggesting that it should be located within - that Wittgenstein did not “unthink” our innermost thoughts and feelings. Hence, the implications of his non-Cartesian account and the exegetical validity of the objections thereto can be more fully explored by inspecting the compatibility of Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion and his take on the psyche.

I accordingly examined Wittgenstein’s religious writings with basically two questions in mind, derived from my conclusion that situates psychological phenomena in a person’s (contextualized shades of) behaviour, taken as an instance of a broad reactive pre-figuration: Does Wittgenstein, first of all, maintain that a person’s doings and sayings form the locus of her belief, and does he, secondly, hold that these doings and sayings only qualify as manifestations of religiosity against the background of a larger, supra-individual pattern?

My exploration of the answers that the Notebooks, the Tractatus and the Lecture on Ethics offer to these questions took up the greater part of this chapter, primarily because several details concerning the Tractarian system needed to be spelled out as well. As I explained, the early Wittgenstein takes the so-called individual will to be the bearer of ethico-religious worth in a world that is as such ethically neutral but the bare existence of which is nonetheless of absolute value. Every individual therefore faces the choice to either live her life in acceptance and respect of the world as it happens to be, or make her life into a struggle – as futile as it is disrespectful - to bend the worldly happenings to her needs and desires. Wittgenstein, in other words, presents life itself as the pre-eminent ethical task. He accordingly locates the ethico-religious will in a person’s doings and sayings, yet even though he claims that willing coincides or concurs with acting, he does not equate willing with acting all the way through. In line with the strict distinction he supports between fact and value, Wittgenstein maintains that the will is an attitude of the subject to the world as it is manifested in the way she leads her life. Whether
an action is morally good or bad thus depends on the kind of life it is part and parcel of, and the ethical will can, conversely, be said to be an intrinsic part of everything a person says and does. The individual will, I concluded, forms the ethico-religious dimension of human conduct.

Needless to say, and as I already remarked, this is consistent with Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of psychology in that it situates a person’s ethico-religious outlook in her doings and sayings, without thereby reducing it to mere behaviour. Similar to the later Wittgenstein’s account of the mental, the early Wittgenstein takes religiosity to be an aspect of what a person says and does. However, to also repeat the other observation I made when wrapping up my discussion of the Notebooks, Tractatus and Lecture on Ethics, the early Wittgenstein more precisely takes religiosity to be an aspect of everything a person says and does, which points to a contrast between his philosophy of psychology and his philosophy of religion. According to Wittgenstein, religious belief concerns the way in which a person leads his life in its entirety, and it therefore seems that the background against which a person’s doings and sayings have to be seen is not a supra-individual pattern of behaviour, but the existence of an individual human being. So while the early writings are compatible with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology when it comes to the exteriority of belief, they do not seem to be wholly compatible when it comes to the sociality thereof.

I then turned to the Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”, suggesting that since these contemplations concern concrete and collective or recurring religious behaviour – namely, rites and rituals – they might show that Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, or at least his later philosophy of religion, follows the example of his philosophy of psychology after all. I observed that the Remarks on Frazer, while at some points seeming to deny that religion has anything to do with views or opinions – including a Tractatus-style outlook on life and the world – should ultimately be said to simply give a similar negative characterization of religious belief as the early writings. Pace Frazer, Wittgenstein argues that believers do not subscribe to a theory about empirical facts they put into practice with the aim of manipulating the world around them. Frazer is wrong to describe rituals as a flawed and expendable form of scientific activity because he is wrong to interpret it as a form of scientific activity in the first place. Yet I also explained that although the Remarks on Frazer do not offer an explicit alternative account of the relationship between religious belief and religious behaviour, like the early writings do, in the assumptions it makes the Remarks suggest that Wittgenstein came to locate religious belief – like psychological phenomena in general – in supra-individual patterns of behaviour. Judging by these observations, I argued, his later philosophy of religion is in line with his later philosophy of psychology in both respects indeed.

Judging by the Lectures on Religious Belief, however, as I pointed out in the fourth section, that conclusion was premature; the same assumptions about the sociality of religiosity are not at work in all later writings. The Lectures do not only have a
different emphasis from the Remarks in explicitly investigating the epistemology of religious belief - rather than at some points denying it has any cognitive component - the former collection also situates religiosity in the individual believer’s entire existence, just as the early writings do. To be sure, the Lectures are of a kind with the Remarks on Frazer for taking on science as one of the main discourses from which religion should be distinguished, and its explaining religious belief in terms of thoughts and pictures does not make for an outright contradiction with the anti-intellectualistic arguments against Frazer, but Wittgenstein’s use of the word “picture” here nonetheless indicates that he did not abandon his initial individualistic conception of religiosity, regardless of what the comments on The Golden Bough suggest.

For as I explained after a short digression on the way the later Wittgenstein more generally employs this term, by speaking of a religious picture he means to say that the believer’s existence displays a distinctive unity or structure. The idea of the Last Judgement, say, places everything he does and undergoes in a specific light and consequently makes his life into a meaningful whole. And this implies, I observed, that according to Lectures on Religious Belief - similar to the account offered in the Notebooks, the Tractatus and the Lecture on Ethics – someone’s religiosity only comes into view when one looks at his doings and sayings against the background of his specific life as a whole, rather than against the background of a supra-individual pattern. Such an account may be in line with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology when it comes to the exteriority of belief, it diverges from the latter when it comes to the sociality thereof.

The last collection of remarks I consulted, Culture and Value, confirmed this conclusion about the (not-quite-perfect) compatibility of Wittgenstein’s thoughts on the psyche and his view on religion. Indeed, it reaffirmed a key topic that emerged from all writings consulted up to that point, for although Wittgenstein does not emphasize the exact same things each and every time, he is strikingly consistent in presenting religiosity as a non-factual affair that cannot be judged by scientific standards. Culture and Value, too, argues that the existential impact of religion cannot be explained in terms of theories or doctrines. More explicitly than the Remarks on Frazer, moreover, it discusses the rule of the religious community and of collective or recurring religious behaviour. However, whereas the Remarks on Frazer try to safeguard ritualistic patterns from theoretical (over)interpretation, some of the Culture and Value entries boldly state that someone’s being a true believer can never be equated to her participating in pre-existing religious practices, no matter how adequately and non-theoretically these practices are understood. Wittgenstein argues that a truly religious person need not do and say the same things as people who are usually considered to be pre-eminently pious, as well as that those who do display conventionally religious behaviour may not be eligible for the epithet “believer” after all, depending the form or shape they give their lives.
I immediately remarked that this is not wholly contradictory to Wittgenstein’s account of the psyche, given that he also argues that there are no hard and fast rules for what counts as an instance of a certain psychological phenomenon, as well as that it depends on the larger context exactly what state of mind is expressed by what doings and sayings. In the case of religious belief, however, Wittgenstein may not claim that there is no behaviour whatsoever that distinguishes believers from non-believers, he nonetheless maintains that evidence for the ascription of religiosity is even more ambiguous and dispersed that in the case of other or ordinary mental matters. When it comes to religious belief, the third person needs to take a person’s entire way of living into account and may lack familiar patterns to fall back on.

The main difference between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology and his philosophy of religion accordingly seems to lie, not in the fact that Wittgenstein holds religiosity to be a literally inner process, or even in the fact that he takes it to come in different forms, but in the fact that he considers it to be a highly individual affair. And this becomes even clearer when the Culture and Value remarks addressing the upbringing of the religious believer are taken into account as well. For whereas Wittgenstein maintains that it is, for a large part of one’s psychological repertoire, indispensable to learn to partake in pre-existing practices, he claims that the religious believer need not make anything concerning her elders’ convictions her own. In contrast to the infant learning to participate in her community’s psychological practices, the choice is up to the individual believer herself. Or as Wittgenstein urged his friend O’Drury: “Make sure that your religion is a matter between you and God only.”

This, then, is the account of religious belief to be found in Wittgenstein’s writings, both early and late. On his view, religiosity concerns the direction one give one’s life. It amounts to “a way of living, or a way of assessing life,” to once more use the words of Culture and Value. Now this account may not be the most groundbreaking one – indeed, Wittgenstein’s initial thoughts on religion are to a large extent indebted to Schopenhauer, while the influence of Kierkegaard is unmistakeably present in the later work – but that does not mean that no arguments can be raised against it. It could for instance be objected that Wittgenstein may have offered an account of something resembling religious belief but not of religious belief as such, because he provides no means for distinguishing the believer from the atheist, or from the dedicated hobbyist, for that matter. According to the account spelled out above, after all, the main criterion for someone’s’ being a believer is that she makes her life into a meaningful whole, not how she proceeds in doing so or what pictures and paradigms she uses to that end.

128 Drury 1981b, p. 117.
129 CV 64d; see also CV 32c, CV 61c; cf. Clack 1999, p. 55.
130 Cf. note 18 on page 100, note 33 on page 112 and note 38 on page 114 of this study.
Yet neither a life organized around the idea of there being no God, nor one placed in the service of model trains, say, would normally be called religious.

To an objection along these lines, Wittgenstein would first of all respond by stating that the atheist – whether she likes it or not – might lead just as much a religious life as the person who uses more traditional pictures or paradigms (and is at any rate more religious than the person who thinks that believing in God means believing in a being for the existence of which proof can and should be given). In Wittgenstein’s book, the relevant distinction is not that between persons who are biblically or theistically inspired and those who get their inspiration somewhere else. The relevant distinction is that between persons who are concerned with the meaning of life and those who go through life thoughtlessly.

Moreover, that religious belief in essence concerns a perspective on life and the world also means that on Wittgenstein’s account, too, the model train collector is ruled out from being called a religious believer. For that the believer organizes his life around a picture does not mean that just any picture will do; Wittgenstein’s account implies that the picture in question should have sufficient existential impact and can provide a foothold for coming to grips with human existence or existence as such. But then again, what pictures do and what pictures do not possess these qualities should be said to differ from person to person. According to Wittgenstein, in any case, the choice is up to the individual believer herself, and she might also give her life a highly unorthodox form or shape.

This brings me to another objection that might be raised against Wittgenstein’s explanation of religious belief, namely, that even though the believer ultimately faces God all by himself, so to speak, the social nature of religion cannot for that reason be downplayed or disparaged. For many-if not most-religious persons, after all, sharing their outlook with others and collectively trying to give their existence a certain shape or structure forms a vital element of their way of life. Is Wittgenstein therefore not plain wrong to present religiosity as a wholly individual affair? What is more, does this account not violate his own precept to “don’t think, but look!”131 to simply describe (religious) practices as they are rather than impose one’s own hopes and desires?

When it comes to an objection of this kind, it should first be noted that Wittgenstein does not deny that believers might organize their lives in the same way and around the same pictures as others. He however does maintain that this is not part and parcel of being religious, and in this sense his account is, indeed, not so much a description of customary religious practices as an expression of his own deepest convictions as to what it means to be a believer. Given that the descriptive is not necessarily devoid of each and every evaluative component, this need not be taken to form a full-blown violation of Wittgenstein’s descriptive approach. But then again, it can be doubted whether the question as to the nature of religious belief lends itself to a descriptive treatment at all. For even if a clear distinction

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131 PI 66.
between the normative and the descriptive cannot always be made, should this question not be placed firmly on the normative side of the normative-descriptive scale? Wittgenstein, at any rate, clearly takes an evaluative approach to religiosity. Even if his account implies that many who are usually considered religious are ruled out from being called true believers, he is adamant that religion should be a matter between the individual believer and God only.

And to come back to my reason for consulting Wittgenstein’s religious writings in the first place, this is also precisely the point at which his philosophy of religion diverges from his philosophy of psychology. Even though one of his remarks describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of “the interplay of forces within,” his view on religiosity is consistent with his account of the psyche in locating it in the direction of the believer’s existence rather than a private inner realm. Yet for the very reason that his philosophy of religion is compatible with his philosophy of psychology when it comes to the exteriority of belief, his account of religiosity does not follow his portrayal of the psyche when it comes to the sociality thereof. It is after all the individual believer’s existence in which religiosity should be situated, regardless of the way in which his fellow human beings make their lives into a meaningful whole.

Or to be precise, Wittgenstein does not hold that faith is so idiosyncratic a matter that a believer can never be recognized and that she can moreover never share a direction in life with other believers. However, he does maintain that when the believer makes her life into a meaningful whole by partaking in readily recognizable pre-existing patterns, this should be based on her own individual choice. Even if Wittgenstein does not claim that there is one clear and distinct way of expressing mental matters such as gratitude and grief, this makes for a difference with his philosophy of psychology where there is no such talk of having to make a decision.

Hence, there is a non-quite-perfect compatibility between Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion and his take on the psyche, with some interesting consequences as a result. The preceding discussion has shown that the reading of post-Cartesianism (or of Wittgenstein’s version of post-Cartesianism) on which the ethical objections of commentators such as Frank and Murdoch are based, is not entirely correct. That is to say, and leaving aside what this may mean for the morality of his perspective, this chapter made clear that Wittgenstein’s rethinking of the Cartesian inner-outer model does not entail a denial of our inmost thoughts and feelings in the sense that it does not condemn him to locate religious belief in externalities or superficialities. Yet the explorations in this chapter have not shown that post-Cartesianism’s critics have no reason to be sceptical whatsoever. While Wittgenstein’s account of human being as essentially embodied forms no obstacle to his view on religiosity, the question as to how it can be reconciled with his account of human being as essentially embedded becomes all the more acute. For how can he

132 CV 33a; cf. pp. 99-100 of this study.
on the one hand hold that the subject is to an important extent the product of its upbringing, and on the other hand claim that the believer can and should choose a direction in life wholly of his own accord? Does this not demonstrate that Wittgenstein undermines his own undermining of Cartesianism after all? Needless to say, in the remainder of this study I will have a closer look at Wittgenstein’s rethinking of the Cartesian self-other model. Not only because of its apparent inconsistency with his philosophy of religion, but also because it forms another element of post-Cartesianism that has been severely criticized.