

Answering Sraffa on Religion: Wittgenstein Walking the Tightrope

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Abstract The subject of religion, one might think, although discussed in the *Tractatus*, is conspicuously absent from or in Wittgenstein's later works, particularly in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Using Sraffa's comments as a starting point, I tentatively deal with the absence of the subject by considering the question whether Wittgenstein's religious views are compatible with his philosophies in the *Tractatus* and in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Answering this question involves examining Wittgenstein's own central concern about his convictions in his later years, namely, to what extent one can honestly be a religious thinker nowadays. Presumably, his philosophy might not allow a 'philosophy of religion', if his own views on religion are not compatible with his philosophy. I tackle these issues beginning with Wittgenstein's conversations with Ludwig Hänsel, then move to his later views and relevant passages in the *Philosophical Investigations*. With this in place, I uncover a religious moment that is not completely apparent in his later book, namely, an admission of errors that is a sort of confession.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Religion. Religious belief. Confession. Sraffa. Hänsel. Tolstoy.

Summary 1 Sraffa, Wittgenstein and Religion. – 2 On Wittgenstein's *Early* (Christian) Religious Values. – 3 *Later Views: A Tightrope Walker*. – 4 Backdoor Metaphysics? Religion and the Inevitability of a *Weltanschauung*. – 5 *Investigations: Two Remarks on Religion*. – 6 A Religious Point of View Expressed in a Confession. – 7 "Religious Puzzles" and the Critique of Religion.



Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2024-02-12
Published 2024-10-14

Open access

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Citation Engelmann, Mauro (2024). "Answering Sraffa on Religion: Wittgenstein Walking the Tightrope". *JoLMA*, 5, Special issue, 65-86.

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.
(CV, 73)

If someone tells me he has bought the outfit of a tightrope walker I am not impressed until I see what is done with it.
(Drury 1984, 88)

1 Sraffa, Wittgenstein and Religion

In October 1941, Wittgenstein gave a copy of the *Blue Book* to Sraffa, who wrote some comments. One of them concerns the following passage in the *Blue Book*:

When we talk of language as a symbolism used in an exact calculus, that which is in our mind can be found in the sciences and in mathematics. Our ordinary use of language conforms to this standard of exactness only in rare cases. Why then do we in philosophizing constantly compare our use of words with one following exact rules? The answer is that the puzzles which we try to remove *always spring from just this attitude towards language*. (BB, 25-6; emphasis added)

In this passage, Wittgenstein is criticising philosophers who take language (or thought) as structured by a kind of calculus. Of course, although he does not say so, he was himself one of them in the past: he had a “calculus attitude to language” in the *Tractatus* and in the *Big Typescript* (see Engelmann 2013, ch. 3). Contrary to his philosophy in the *Tractatus* and in the *Big Typescript*, the point of the *Blue Book* is to uncover the calculus conception as the *source* of philosophical troubles.

Among Sraffa’s comments one finds the question “Metaphysics, Why Not Theology?” referring to the quoted passage of the *Blue Book*. He explains his point to Wittgenstein in the following way:

Also, why do you deal always with metaphysics and never with theology? Are not their puzzles very similar (e.g., omniscience in god and freewill in man)? But could it be said that theol[ogical] puzzles only arise when people take the calculus’ attitude to language? (N.B. I am not suggesting that this is the reason you leave theology alone). (Venturinha 2012, 184)

Sraffa’s criticism is expressed in the first and third questions, the latter being ironical. The ground for it is the second question. Indeed,

metaphysical and theological puzzles, as Sraffa points out, if not identical, are at least very similar, for theologians and metaphysicians ask, for example, whether God's omniscience is compatible with the existence of freewill in human beings. However, if they are similar, how can Wittgenstein say that the puzzles he tries to remove *always* spring from the calculus attitude? Giving the similarity between theological and metaphysical puzzles, it seems very strange indeed to say that puzzles always arise from a calculus attitude towards language, for no theologian seems to deal with such conception at all. Thus, one obvious point of Sraffa's critique is Wittgenstein's dogmatic statement that something is always the case.

However, Sraffa's critique is interesting because he is obviously teasing Wittgenstein when he says that Wittgenstein wants *to leave theology alone*. Wittgenstein does not seem to investigate in the *Blue Book*, or in any other work, *how* theological problems/puzzles arise, or which are their sources. Rather, he uses his genetic method in a restricted way by examining only the genesis of puzzles in philosophy (and perhaps in science, depending on how one sees it).¹

Of course, there is the question of how exactly his criticisms of metaphysics should apply to religion, but one might think the following about his various philosophies.² If there are no sentences of ethics or metaphysics, as argued in the *Tractatus*, there are no sentences concerning God either. Pseudo-sentences concerning God must be *merely* nonsense. If metaphysical claims are unverifiable nonsense, "wheels turning idly", as Wittgenstein argues in *Philosophical Remarks* (1930), then theological claims are also unverifiable nonsense, i.e., simply nonsense. If philosophy is full of misleading analogies, as argued in the *Blue Book* and in *Philosophical Investigations*, apparently the same or worse takes place in theology. In this case, one would need to investigate how puzzles in religion arise and how they dissolve with Wittgenstein's method. Thus, all of Wittgenstein's philosophies seem to imply a harsh critique of theological/religious claims.

Therefore, Sraffa's questioning challenges the compatibility of Wittgenstein's understanding of logic, 'grammar', and method in his philosophy with his views on religion (but also, it seems, his views on culture in general). In Sraffa's view, Wittgenstein suspiciously *decided* to leave theology/religion alone.

1 On the origins of the genetic method see chapter 2 of Engelmann 2013 and Engelmann 2012.

2 The plural (philosophies) means his central views throughout his career in unfinished works where one finds a systematic treatment of philosophical problems: *Philosophical Remarks*, the *Big Typescript*, the *Blue Book*, and the *Brown Book*. I focus on two of Wittgenstein's works in this paper, although I think that understanding those in-between philosophies in themselves is a very serious and urgent matter.

However, has Wittgenstein really left theology alone? Can he, or should he, do it? Some responses to these difficulties should be avoided. I have in mind jargon-answers like “Propositions in religion are nonsense, but they manage to *show* something lying beyond facts in a *mystical way*” or “There are no religious truths, but only rules of a religious grammar”. How could such a jargon satisfy us? On the one hand, the ‘showing’ metaphor is precisely what is strange and what we need to leave alone or explain away in these contexts, for it provides no explanation. The word ‘mystic’ has the same problem, but it is a little worse, for it reminds one of superstitious obscurity. On the other hand, when dealing with the later Wittgenstein, ‘grammar’ becomes a suspicious word. Saying something like “religious discourse is part of the language game of religion and follows its own rules of sense; therefore, religious discourse makes sense”, is very fishy.³ Why should we accept those rules of ‘grammar’ or even the *talk* about ‘grammar’ in theology? What is the meaning of ‘grammar’ here and elsewhere? If mathematical equations are ‘rules of grammar’, for instance, should we think that theology and mathematics are part of a comprehensive ‘grammar’? Are ‘rules of theology’ somehow ‘necessary’? Are rules of mathematics and theology the same sort of rules? The word ‘grammar’ is jargon that has invited jargon abuse.

We need to take a different road. We know that Wittgenstein was interested in religion and respected religious writers such as Weininger, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Kierkegaard. Let us begin with the obvious fact that he was a kind of religious person or, as he preferred to say it, “I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view” (see Malcolm 2002, 24). In the following sections I argue, tentatively, for the compatibility of his personal views with his early and later philosophies.

2 **On Wittgenstein’s *Early* (Christian) Religious Values**

It is a widespread belief that Wittgenstein was a sort of ‘mystic’ at the time of the *Tractatus*. What sort? In a letter from 1919, Russell told Ottoline Morrell, who was herself a sort of ‘mystic’, that Wittgenstein “has become a complete mystic” who was reading Silesius and Kierkegaard, but that “all started with William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*”, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky (Russell 2002, 198-9). However, as already mentioned, the label ‘mystic’ is not helpful at all. The word suggests a mystery, perhaps something superstitious. For Tolstoy, for instance, the mysterious and mystical was just the opposite

³ Although such a rough view is not explicitly defended in the literature, it fueled, for instance, the classical debate between Philips (2005) and Nielsen (2005).

of the simple, clear, and reasonable teachings of Christ (Tolstoy 1922, 113). Moreover, as observes Tolstoy when criticising traditional religion, “the recommendation to obey the moral law was put in the most obscure, vague, and mystical terms” (81). Indeed, the mystical, the vague, and the obscure are very close. Thus, the word ‘mystic’ does not give us anything useful and concrete as a Wittgensteinian view.

Fortunately, there are facts that allow us to get concrete here, for Wittgenstein’s friend Ludwig Hänsel is a good source. He provides valuable information about the issue in his diaries from the time that he met Wittgenstein in 1919 in the Prison Camp of Monte Casino. He notices that for Wittgenstein the “gospel faith” is “astonishingly certain” (Hänsel 2012, 47). This means that “the gospel is sacrosanct, untouchable, above all talking” (44-5). At the time of the *Tractatus* at least, this relates to his conviction that Tolstoy’s presentation of the gospels – “heretic” according to Hänsel – was *accurate*:

Wittgenstein has unshakable faith in the accuracy (*Genauigkeit*) of Tolstoy’s textual work – he prefers to believe in variants unknown to us rather than in arbitrariness. (55)

Considering that Tolstoy might not be the most precise scholar regarding the bible, Wittgenstein’s view is astonishing. The motivation behind such faith in Tolstoy’s interpretation, however, is as astonishing as interesting: Wittgenstein was really touched by the message of Tolstoy’s *Gospel*. Hänsel was impressed by his seriousness, a seriousness that went to the point of *conversion*:

The depth and seriousness with which Wittgenstein thinks of his conversion, with which he suffers from procrastination. (56)

In which way the conversion could take place, and to what exactly Wittgenstein would convert, we might never know. However, we know through Hänsel that quite apart from the conversion plan, Wittgenstein indeed accepted essential traits of a Tolstoian *Weltanschauung*. In Hänsel’s words, Wittgenstein saw the Tolstoian/Christian *Gospel* in the following way:

Relationship to God and to the Gospels strengthened by Tolstoy’s *godless* religiosity. Jesus is God because he is the man in whom there is nothing ethically deficient, because he is good without overcoming. *He does not want to accept that God means something else, namely Creator, Lord of Being*, and that the angels are not God despite their unswerving ethical purity. (51; emphasis added)

This shows that Wittgenstein agreed with the essence of Tolstoy’s “heretical” views, particularly with the belief that God is among us

(one finds God in other human beings), that Christ is the example of what is moral, and that an external God is a non-needed fiction (see Tolstoy 1922, 420-1, Recapitulation III). As we will see in what follows, there is also agreement in some relevant details between the *Tractatus* and Tolstoian Christianity.

However, is such an agreement compatible with the *Tractatus*? I think it is, if we do not transform the book into a metaphysical doctrine of nonsensicality about God and ethics. Wittgenstein's *non*-commitment to certain doctrines, as italicised in the quote above, is crucial. First, as Hänsel makes clear, Tolstoy's *Gospel* is in a sense godless. I.e., what is really fundamental is the ethical perfection expressed in Christ, whereas God the Creator is dispensable. Therefore, we need to investigate the dispensability of a creator and the viability of ethics, for there are no sentences of ethics (TLP, 6.42).

We must be quite careful when we interpret sentences like "God does not reveal himself *in the world*" (TLP, 6.432) or when we want to grasp what it means that what makes the world non-accidental "must lie outside the world" (TLP, 6.41). This cannot mean that a Lord of Being created the world with ethical "necessity" and that such Lord and his ethical imperatives are outside the world in the realm of value. This would not agree with Wittgenstein's non-acceptance of a Lord of Being (godless Tolstoianism). Moreover, and this is essential, the philosophy of logic of the *Tractatus* would not allow for such a conclusion anyway. It is crucial that we stick to what the *Tractatus* really demonstrates (its limits) and to what the arguments in the book can answer for honestly.

The point of the mentioned passages really concerns what takes place *in the world*. That God does not reveal himself in the world means that there is nothing like a miracle of God, for all facts (all are contingent, of course) are dealt with by science. Of course, if God's existence is erroneously supposed to be a necessity (obviously, it is not a tautology), then it cannot be derived from the contingency of the world anyway. As Wittgenstein points out in his *Lecture on Ethics*, when we look at the world scientifically, i.e., by considering all true propositions that we know (TLP, 4.11), "everything miraculous has disappeared" (LE, 43). It is *despite that* that God-Christ and ethics are fundamental. Evidently, Wittgenstein (and Tolstoy) did not believe in miracles (Tolstoy 1922, 284).

One *might* see the world differently, considering that the very existence of the world might bring us to a mystical *feeling*. The point here is that there is *no logical compulsion* for any of the alternatives: the scientific or the religious. Logic itself, and all that we know a priori, does not imply a specific worldview (see Engelmann 2016). How one feels about or sees the world might vary, but none of such views is a priori excluded or derivable from what we really know a priori. This is the result of the *Tractatus* and its logical point of view.

While Wittgenstein was a sort of Tolstoian concerning religious ethics, he was also a critic of religion as Tolstoy himself, who did not spare offering *well-argued* critiques of the whole Christendom (see Tolstoj 1922, *Gospel*, preface, and *My Religion*). It is interesting to note that Hänsel immediately understood that this critical aspect of Wittgenstein's views was a *result* of the *Tractatus*, and that it threatened his own Catholic views. In his diaries, Hänsel writes that his own "metaphysical belief" (Hänsel 2012, 72) was made weaker by Wittgenstein and asks if he himself should "remain silent", which *meant*, according to him, "disengagement from the church" (45). He admits, however, that he cannot get rid of the "intellectual search for God, of the metaphysics" (45).

Second, the *Tractatus* is arguing against the idea that one can ground ethics (as at some point Moore and Russell wanted to do) - see chapter 4 of Engelmann 2021a. Note, however, that the fact that ethics or value is ungrounded does not imply that one should not live an ethical (or religious) life and have values. That would be like not playing or listening to Beethoven because his musical principles of harmony are not grounded philosophically. The point is rather: if one wants to live an ethical (or religious) life, one does it because one accepts it (in spite of everything), and not because one makes a philosophically grounded choice, a sort of derivation from more fundamental principles or a priori truths. The "philosophically grounded" in all fundamental philosophical questions is an illusion that the symbolism of the *Tractatus* dissolves (see Engelmann 2021a, ch. 4).

Therefore, in a Dostoevskyan mood, one could say that the acceptance of the ethical might take place despite everything. Later, in a meeting with the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein says, against Schlick, that the deepest view on ethics is not the philosophical one that says "*p* is right and, therefore, God wants *p*", but the religious one that says "God wants *p*, therefore *p* is right" (WVC, 115). The latter view is deeper, for Wittgenstein, not because he is an 'irrationalist' who asks us to accept absurdities. Quite the opposite. It is deeper because it makes clear that there is no grounding for *p*. One can elucidate ethics, but one cannot ground it logically/philosophically. Without grounding, all one can do is accept *p* along with God, or not. "God wants *p* ..." is just another way to say, "I cannot go further than this, I simply acknowledge the limit of justification", for obviously God itself is no explanation or grounding at all.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein makes the point by saying that the "ancients" were at least right for not trying to make it appear as if everything was explained, as supposedly "moderns" do (see Engelmann 2016). The ancients "have a clear and acknowledged terminus" (TLP, 6.372). So, from a logical point of view, they were clearer than the moderns. Note that for Tolstoy there is no grounding for the teachings of Christ either. He understands Christ as saying: "My teaching is not

proved in any way, except that men give themselves up to it, because it alone has the promise of life for men" (Tolstoj 1922, 433).

The acceptance of ethical-religious values might depend on examples that one sees, hears, and reads about. Supposedly, for Christians, Christ is an example to be followed. He is certainly so according to Wittgenstein's Tolstoian view. Personally, for Tolstoy, the Russian peasants that he met had an important role in his conversion. They helped him to change his life and accept the teachings of Christ (Tolstoj 1922, 40-1). The change in Tolstoy's life occurred when he stopped looking for the solution of the problem of life and looked at those who live without that problem (Tolstoj 1922, 48-9). He tells us that he looked at two wrong places before solving his problem. First, he thought that science would teach him. That was not true, for science does not deal with that problem (it deals with the problem of describing the world outside the perspective of the individual who asks such questions). Second, he thought that philosophy could help him, especially Schopenhauer. That quest resulted in a big disappointment. Schopenhauer said that life had no meaning, therefore he certainly did not understand the meaning if there is one. So, if there is a meaning of life, he thought, the best would be to try to find it among those who think that there is a meaning (in his case, the peasants). However, once one grasps the meaning of life, one knows nothing more except that the problem vanishes, and cannot therefore instruct someone else, but only say: "Formerly I did not see the meaning of life; now I see. I know no more" (Tolstoj 1922, 433). Of course, TLP, 6.521 is a quite interesting rephrasing of this point.

There is another important result for the lack of grounding for what has value. If one accepts that one needs to live an ethical life, one will not go on and impose dogmas on other people. If the *Tractatus* is right, dogmatism does not work logically, given the lack of ground for ethics and value (note that this is also true for a grounding of a "scientific worldview" (Engelmann 2016)). A dogmatic person concerning ethics and religion, one might say, is a person that does not understand the logic of our language and thought, which cannot ground *a priori* 'principles'. One might say, therefore, that the *Tractatus* is quite compatible with Tolstoy's attack on dogmas of Christendom (see preface to Tolstoy's *Gospel*).

What the lack of grounding of ethics also shows, logically, is the need for tolerance concerning other forms of religion (those that one does not accept as his own). Indeed, a Tolstoian Christian might admire other kinds of religious lives, as Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*, a Muslim, makes clear. As we know, Wittgenstein read this book in 1912, right after its posthumous publication and thought that it was "wonderful" (Wittgenstein 2005a, 35).

There is also the question of how one might express one's ethical life. Presumably, one will rather express it in actions. If successful,

one's actions might show what the ethical life is. One might not even need to talk. However, actions might include non-dogmatic talking. This means talking in a personal way, in the first person, as Wittgenstein supposedly did in his *Lecture on Ethics* (see LE, 41). He tells us that that was indeed his intention (WVC, 118). Presumably, a confession telling one's story could work properly here.

Thus, it might be no accident that Tolstoy told us his life story in his *Confession*. Moreover, one cannot underestimate the value of a confession in Wittgenstein's own life. Already in 1919, he talks about it with Hänsel (2012, 52), but apparently does it only in 1936-37. The fundamental value of an honest confession also expresses the view of Dostoevsky, as is made clear in *Brothers Karamazov* (I, I, 5), where the significance of a confession is elaborated in Zosima's teachings and its difficulties presented in the life inside the monastery. Besides, first person report and confessions are the Jamesian doors into religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (see Engelmann, Floyd, forthcoming). Thus, confession in a context of honest testimony and willingness to act in life appears as a central aspect of an honest view of religion for Wittgenstein, and this agrees with his favourite religious authors. In what follows, we will see that this is in the background of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Later in section 6 I return to the significance of confessions for Wittgenstein, particularly of his 'hidden' confession in the *Investigations*.

3 **Later Views: A Tightrope Walker**

Independently of the radical changes that his early philosophy went through after the recognition of "grave mistakes" (PI, preface), Wittgenstein always kept the fundamentals of his early ethical/religious views. This is by itself a quite significant fact. What changes is the way that he presents his views by considering some complications derived from them. He adapted his views to new challenges and, arguably, developed quite interesting views on the subject. One of those complications is the variety of religions, the fact that religion comes in very different dressings and cultural backgrounds, as is discussed in his *Remarks on Frazer* (see Engelmann, Floyd, forthcoming; Engelmann 2016).

In what follows, I will not be able to show that his religious views are indeed compatible with his later philosophy. This would be a complex and long task that I cannot fulfil here. Instead, I will suggest that for Wittgenstein *himself* his philosophy is compatible with his views on religion (and perhaps other views) as long as the religious views are completely honest regarding their lack of grounding. I do not intend to show him right or wrong about this. I begin by showing how the early and later views come together.

It is to Drury that Wittgenstein explains in a nutshell, probably in 1930, how his old Tolstoian view is supposed to work. The following passage links the early and the later views:

But remember that Christianity is not a matter of saying a lot of prayers, in fact we are told not to do that. If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn't be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different. It is my belief that only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God. (Drury 1984, 114)

The most important thing in religion is (or should be) living according to it, and not praying and talking. For the early and late Wittgenstein, the real issue is the "ethical relation" with Christ, a human being "who is God" (PPO, 223; MS, 183, 215). As he had already told Hänsel in 1919, Christ is "the perfect one" (see PPO, 221, 223, 227, 241, 243; from 1937). Early and later Wittgenstein, in his tentative Christianity, refuses doctrines or dogmas as part of serious religion. It is the non-theoretical character of religion and its significance for a change in life that really matters:

I believe that one of the things that Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.) (CV, 53; from 1946)

However, the later Wittgenstein is more open to some complicating facts concerning how religion is practised; for instance, the fact that strange/miraculous doctrines may be believed (life after death, final judgment, and so on). Evidently, not all Christian thinkers are opposed to such views, like Tolstoy was. Dostoevsky, for instance, had firm belief in immortality and put all his hopes in life after death (see Frank 1988, 296-309).

In 1930-31, Wittgenstein still thought according to a purely Tolstoian perspective when he argued with Schlick that talking was not essential to religion, and that he could imagine a religion in which there is no doctrine, "no talking" (WVC, 117). However, such a claim is suspicious, for how do we determine the 'essential' here? Moreover, it is a fact that the most traditional religions on earth have a lot of doctrinal talking and one might say that it indeed appears to be the case that talking is fundamental considering that people talk all the time about doctrines or presuppose them in their religious practices, in their reports about it, and so on. Is one not even asked to convert other people? How is such an activity to take place if not in talking about religion? One might show how to live religiously in acts, but this will not be enough, for one lives in accordance with one specific religion

and its 'beliefs' (a belief, presumably, might be a statement about God, life, etc., or an attitude towards life, the neighbour, god, etc.).

This is one of the reasons why Wittgenstein tries to get clearer about how he stands in relation to beliefs in doctrines around 1936-37. Another reason is an urge to get clearer about what he himself can believe honestly concerning Christianity:

Not the letter, only conscience can command me - to believe in resurrection, judgment, etc. To believe not as something probable but in a different sense. (PPO, 157).⁴

The different sense of belief is, of course, faith. The trouble is, as I have argued, that "the Christian solution of the problem of life" seems to require "salvation, resurrection, judgment, heaven, hell" (PPO, 169). Besides, apparently many people *honestly* believed those things (Dostoevsky, for instance). However, the real issue underlying this is that if the example of Christ implies a change of life, as Wittgenstein often emphasises, what happens is that "if one lives differently, one speaks differently", "one learns new language games" (PPO, 169). Thus, one might imagine religion with "no talking", but religious people *do* talk a lot.

Since one must mean what one says, it may seem that the concepts, 'salvation', 'final judgment', 'resurrection', and so on, are needed in Christian "language games" after all, and that one must have a faith grounded in them. However, Wittgenstein did not take this extra step into ordinary religion. Whereas the Christian ethical demand always appeared to him as the correct demand on how one must live one's life, some concepts used in Christianity were difficult to swallow. This, again, is very Tolstoian, for his *Gospel* does not contain the story about Christ's resurrection and other passages that are difficult to swallow for *us*, modern human beings (miracles, for instance). There is a thin line between living a religious life, accepting certain concepts, and living dishonestly. In fact, this was a problem for Tolstoy after his conversion, for he had to struggle against all superstitious thinking of the Orthodox Russian peasants who were the inspiration that brought him back to Christianity. He tells us that when he was ready for conversion, he thought the following:

I was now ready to accept any faith that did not require of me a direct denial of reason, for that would be a lie... (Tolstoj 1922, 47)

This meant getting rid of superstitions, for "much that was superstitious was mingled with the truths of Christianity" (Tolstoj 1922, 49).

⁴ On resurrection see also CV, 33.

For Wittgenstein, this conflict takes place in a way that is a little different, perhaps because of his admiration for Dostoevsky. On the one hand, one might get the impression that only at a higher stage inside a religious life strange concepts like ‘resurrection’ can play a real role (see PPO, 155, 181). One needs a very strong faith to go as far as believing in resurrection (Dostoevsky had it). On the other, one can only accept such concepts in religion *honestly*, of course, otherwise religion is a lie. This is why Wittgenstein writes:

I think I should tell myself: “Don’t be servile in your religion!” or try not to be! For that is in the direction of superstition. (MS 183, 198; PPO, 207)

This means the following:

I *believe* that I should not be superstitious, that is, that I should not perform magic on myself with words I may be reading, that is, that I should and must not talk myself into a sort of faith, of unreason. (PPO, 203)

Wittgenstein, as an honest religious thinker, therefore, expresses his opposition to the uncritical acceptance of strange religious concepts:

I don’t have a belief in a salvation through the death of Christ; or at least not yet. I also don’t feel that I am on the way to such a belief, but I consider it possible that one day I will understand something here of which I understand nothing now; which means nothing to me now & that I will then have a belief that I don’t have now. (PPO, 201-3)

In order to make compatible his reasoning concerning his beliefs and his abhorrence of superstition, Wittgenstein points out that it is a misunderstanding to consider that ‘belief’ means the same in ordinary beliefs and in religious beliefs. The latter involves a whole world-view and, thus, is not like a specific belief that we give up if it is an error, a false opinion. If we give up a religious belief it is not because it was a wrong *opinion* that we simply change in light of new facts, but rather because we now see it as a wrong way to look at things (see PPO, 231; LC, 53-9).

One might also say that the later Wittgenstein is more conscious of the difficulties involved in being a religious person in the modern world. The honesty of the religious thinker, thus, comes to the forefront when he is confronted with a so-to-speak unfavourable reality. Wittgenstein’s fundamental later view, I take it, is that “an honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker”, for he has no real grounding for his certainty or beliefs, yet he can keep his positions

with a great effort (CV, 73). One cannot pretend that one is moving in a ground where there is a foundational argument to sustain one's position when one talks about religion. One grasps religious and ethical views – arguably, for Wittgenstein the only deep/real ethics is religious – without any support, despite everything.

This kind of honesty was already the issue in his early thought, as seen above, although at that time Wittgenstein did not seem to worry much about the lack of sustainability of such views when they are brought in contact with the real world. One can say, thus, that the later Wittgenstein is more realistic concerning his own religiosity. Simultaneously, he seems more inclined to go deeper into religious concepts that play an important role in certain religious thinkers (for instance, Dostoevsky). However, he does not give in to doctrines after all (one might say that he remains Tolstoian).

4 **Backdoor Metaphysics? Religion and the Inevitability of a *Weltanschauung***

It is not only religion that Wittgenstein leaves alone in his works. Religion is part of what one might call *Weltanschauung*, i.e., a world view, a general way to look at things, so that one sees facts as expressing certain rules or tendencies. This *kind of metaphysical view is not criticised by Wittgenstein except when it is used dogmatically or dishonestly*. This kind of metaphysics, if you call it nonsense or not, is simply inevitable.

One interesting example is how one takes history. On reflection, one might see history as the accumulation of knowledge and economical power (capitalistically or socialistically), directed towards a better future of progress. However, someone like Spengler or Wittgenstein might see things differently. For them, development “comes everywhere to an end” so that developing is seen as “a self-containing whole which at some point will be completely present & not a sausage that can run indefinitely” (MS 183, 21; PPO, 29).

The very general traits of a *Weltanschauung* are relevant because they show how one sees our human form of life. Interestingly, perhaps one of the most insightful remarks on Wittgenstein's religious *Weltanschauung* comes from Carnap, who disagreed with him (arguably all members of the Vienna Circle did). In his *Intellectual Autobiography*, Carnap writes:

Once when Wittgenstein talked about religion, the contrast between his and Schlick's position became strikingly apparent. Both agreed of course in the view that the doctrines of religion in their various forms had no theoretical content. But Wittgenstein rejected Schlick's view that religion belonged to the childhood phase

of humanity and would slowly disappear in the course of cultural development. When Schlick, on another occasion, made a critical remark about a metaphysical statement by a classical philosopher (I think it was Schopenhauer), Wittgenstein surprisingly turned against Schlick and defended the philosopher and his work. (Carnap 1991, 26-7)

We cannot know who the mentioned metaphysical philosopher was and the content of the discussion. However, it might well be the case that Wittgenstein “defended” the philosopher because the issue in question was, perhaps, a *Weltanschauung*. In all of Wittgenstein’s religious views there is an obvious dislike of and opposition to the fundamental views of our times, the views behind capitalism and socialism, and of utilitarianism: the ideas of progress and calculus of utility (see CV, 6-8).⁵ Note that Schlick, and apparently all the *anti-metaphysical* members of the Circle held the opposite “metaphysical” worldview regarding history. One of the aspects of this idea is, as Schlick assumed, the disappearance of religion as part of “the childhood phase of humanity”. In Wittgenstein’s *Weltanschauung*, however, religion is a fundamental aspect of what makes us humans. Perhaps only art could have a similar status for him among all the important things that characterise us, human beings. Those are traits of Spengler’s views on history, culture, and religion – see Engelmann 2016; 2021b. When Wittgenstein read him in 1930, he wrote that most of the thoughts in Spengler “are completely in touch with what I have often thought myself” (MS 183, 16; PPO, 25).

Wittgenstein’s *Weltanschauung* in the *Philosophical Investigations* appears directly at the beginning of the book. The incompatibility of his personal views and our time evidently applies to his philosophy as well, as is suggested by the motto and expressed in the preface with the expression “darkness of our times”. He told Drury that “my type of thinking is not wanted in the present age” (Drury 1984, 160).

Possibly, however, Wittgenstein’s religious worldview expresses itself in his philosophy as a whole. This possibility needs to be elucidated, but space prevents me from doing this here. Instead, I discuss the sole two occurrences of religion in the text of the *Investigations* in the next section, and then in section 6 I uncover a religious point of view expressed in a confession in the book.

⁵ On this issue, see Engelmann 2016; 2021b.

5 *Investigations: Two Remarks on Religion*

In Wittgenstein's works after the *Tractatus*, God and religion are not topics of discussion, except for his *Lecture on Ethics*, which is arguably still written in the spirit of the *Tractatus*. Nonetheless, there are two references in the *Investigations*. The first is a parenthetical remark in PI, I, § 373:

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)

As I suggested previously (Engelmann 2013, 262-4), this remark points to the deflation of the notion of 'grammar' rather than to an inflation of the notion of 'theology'. That is, one should see that the notion of 'grammar' does not have the weight of a discipline of the bounds of sense/nonsense, a discipline that tells us about "combinatorial possibilities", for nothing of the sort could find a home in theology. 'Grammar' is not a discipline of sense and nonsense grounded in necessary rules concerning possibilities. In most cases, 'grammar' can be replaced with "use in language" or "descriptions of language use" in Wittgenstein's later philosophy (Engelmann 2013, chs. 3-5).

One might well think that the talk about 'grammar' in religion does not even get to the heart of the matter: it remains at the superficial level. This can be gathered from the context where Wittgenstein indeed discusses this remark from 1937 in MS, 183 (PPO, 211). One learns "the grammar of the word 'God'" by knowing simply what is said about God, for instance, "one kneels & looks up & folds one's hands & speaks, & says one is speaking with God" (PPO, 221). This 'grammar' merely gives us habits of behaviour in certain practices and at best it can be used to teach children how to behave in religious contexts in certain traditions. However, right after talking about the grammar of the word 'God', Wittgenstein writes about what really matters in a coded remark: "A *religious question* is either a question of life or it is (empty) chatter. This language game - one could say - gets played only with questions of life" (MS, 183, 203; PPO, 211). All those rules of 'grammar' are obviously not a "question of life", but minor matters when compared to what really matters.

There is a second appearance of religion in "Part II" of the *Investigations*:

Religion teaches that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated. Now do I understand what it teaches? Of course I understand it - I can imagine various things in connection with it. After all, pictures of these things have even been painted. And why should such a picture be only an imperfect rendering of the idea

expressed? Why should it not do the *same* service as the spoken doctrine? And it is the service that counts. (PI, II, iv § 23)

The remark appears in the context of a discussion concerning automata in which Wittgenstein claims that it is nonsense to say, in ordinary circumstances, “I believe that he is suffering, but am certain that he is not an automaton” (PI, II, iv, § 19). The nonsensicality consists in presenting the sentence as if it was an opinion similar to other certainties and uncertainties. However, not taking other human beings as automata is not an opinion, but an attitude. Usually, we do have an “attitude towards a soul” in relation to other human beings, which makes such pseudo-certainty misleading, for such an attitude is not an opinion that can be seen as an error at all (PI, II, iv § 22). So, § 23 elaborates on the notion of ‘soul’ with religion and painted pictures.

If we take into account what has been said above concerning Wittgenstein’s explicit opposition to doctrines in religion, and if we remember that this was already a fundamental point very early in his career, we understand that what he is really saying here is that if we consider that the pictures/paintings of a soul as distinct from a body do as much service as a doctrine, what he means is that both do very little or no service at all. If we consider religion seriously, those aspects, pictures and doctrines, should not be determining factors. Moreover, as Wittgenstein makes clear in several places, imagining something does not mean understanding (see, for instance, PI, I, §§ 393-8). The fact that “I can imagine many things” does not mean that I understand a thing about what is in question.

However, there is a deeper use of religion in the *Investigations*, precisely in a context where ‘religion’ or ‘God’ does not appear at all.

6 A Religious Point of View Expressed in a Confession

Although in the *Investigations* nothing is said about the motivation for the systematic critique of the *Tractatus* presented there, the motives behind it are religious in a Wittgensteinian sense. The critique is a confession of sins of a sort, i.e., an admission of errors in order to maintain integrity, honesty, and seriousness. Religion is in the background of Wittgenstein’s examined life, in the confession or admission of errors present at the core of his “edifice of pride”, namely, the *Tractatus*.

In Engelmann (2013) I argued that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is characterised by traits that were incorporated gradually: what I call the “genetic method” takes centre stage only in the *Blue Book* (Engelmann 2013, chs. 3-4), the anthropological view appears first systematically in the two versions of the *Brown Book* (chapter 4), and finally the systematic critique of the *Tractatus* by means of the

application of the genetic method appears for the first time in the *Philosophical Investigations* (chapters 4 and 5). I suggested in a footnote that there was “an interesting connection of the application of the method to the T[ractatus] and Wittgenstein’s private life”, the most striking example of “how his life and philosophy are closely related” (Engelmann 2013, 299 fn. 22). I had in mind the contemporaneity of his later critique of the *Tractatus* and his confession of weaknesses and errors (or sins, if one prefers) to several of his friends and family in 1936-37, as is described for instance by Pascal (1984) and attested in Wittgenstein’s letters (see, for instance, PPO, 281-91). Wittgenstein’s first step in 1936 was to confess to his old friend Hänsel, to whom he first said something about confession already in 1919 (see section 2), that he had lied to him about his family origins when they first met. He then extended his confession(s) to family and friends.

As I argued in chapter 4 of Engelmann (2013), Wittgenstein applies the genetic method to his own early philosophy in the *Investigations*, i.e., he uncovers the false pictures, analogies, and trains of thoughts that led him to the central views and the “grave mistakes” of the *Tractatus* (PI, preface). He does so to exemplify his own method with his own case in many remarks between PI, I, § 1 and § 136. However, this gesture is a lot more than that. For if we see the context in which many of the remarks criticising the *Tractatus* in the *Investigations* were originally written, we can determine that the critique expresses a religious attitude. MS, 157a and MS, 157b, where the most important aspects of the genetic critique of the *Tractatus* (PI, I, §§ 89-136) first appear, follow a time of intense religious/ethical reckoning when Wittgenstein wrote an enormous quantity of remarks on religion, Christ, death, and personal beliefs in MS 183. In fact, the first critical evaluation of the *Tractatus* appears in MS, 183, 152 (PPO, 161), 27 January 1937. On 9 February then, after he had written some remarks about the source of the “sublime” conception of logic in the *Tractatus* in MS 183 (see PPO, 161, 167, 173), Wittgenstein writes extensively about it in MS, 157a.

Part of those remarks on religion were presented in section 3, where we saw how Wittgenstein had to examine his old convictions about religion, for he was certain of one thing: “Let me not shy away from any conclusion, but absolutely also not be superstitious! *I do not want to think uncleanly!*” (MS, 183, 173; PPO, 181). What characterises a (Christian) religious struggle against the unclean is trying to get rid of vanity and pride. This struggle is documented in his notebooks. What happens at the time of his confession in 1936-37 is that his most important object of pride needed to be addressed:

The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terrible hard work. (CV, 26; MS, 157a, 57r)

The edifice of his pride was the *Tractatus*, whose fundamental moves are ethically and philosophically examined in 1936-37. In the mentioned MSs Wittgenstein searches for the source of his errors in the *Tractatus* as a religious person searches for the source of her sins in order to plainly confess the deed and what motivated it. One of the sources was the misunderstanding of the ideal of the sublimity of logic, which was taken as the a priori essence of language, thought and world. This led Wittgenstein to grave errors.

Evidently, sometimes one needs to confess that what looked like a good action was in fact motivated by something bad (for instance, one helps a friend out of pride and not out of love). From the religious point of view, as the quote makes clear, the source of the errors of the *Tractatus* was the pride of showing in a sublime logical symbolism nothing less than the essence of everything.

7 'Religious Puzzles' and the Critique of Religion

One of Sraffa's points in his comments on the *Blue Book* was that there is a similarity between metaphysical and religious puzzles (see section 1). He had in mind issues of free-will and the existence of God (presumably their compatibility). Thus, Wittgenstein should not leave religion alone. When religion is puzzling in this way, its destiny should be the same as metaphysics.

We have seen that Wittgenstein himself was critical of religion in several instances. Often in discussions of Wittgenstein on religion one forgets how critical he was, particularly when one intends to use his philosophy to defend or 'understand' religion. However, indeed he did not use his philosophy directly in the *Investigations* or in other later works as a critique of religion. There are a few reasons for this, I think. First, the fact that he discussed aspects of religion grounded in his philosophy in his *Lectures on Religious Belief* in 1938-39. In these lectures, arguably, he uses his philosophy to show how to avoid *misunderstandings* concerning religion. I think that this aspect of his philosophy of religion might be understood as a tentative elucidation of the *possibility of walking the tightrope*. The strategy of avoiding misunderstandings is obviously an important characteristic of the philosophy of the *Investigations* where he aims at "clearing misunderstandings away" (PI, I, § 90). Second, it is also important to notice that in 1941, the year that Sraffa commented on the *Blue Book* and mentioned the free-will puzzle (see section 1), Wittgenstein discussed the problem in his *Lectures on Freedom of the Will* (see Wittgenstein 2017). Third, he might have preferred to avoid a critique of religion in his works because religion is arguably under scientific and philosophical scrutiny or attack very often. Fourth, perhaps he never felt clear *enough* about his own religiosity from the emotional

and from the intellectual point of view. Lack of clarity might lie in the heart of the matter. The tightrope walker might avoid misunderstandings concerning religion, particularly what appears paradoxical, and get rid of “the irritation of the intellect”, but the result then must be taken for what it is: “Nothing at all is *intelligible*, it is just not *unintelligible*” (PPO, 247).

Of course, the fact that Wittgenstein thought critically about religion is not incompatible with his profound admiration for it. In it he saw the ultimate source of ethics and the most extraordinary human passion.

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