LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN:
RELIGION AS A FORM OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

While Wittgenstein is not famous for his writings on religion, it is
certainly possible to interpret his work in such a way that it can be
applied to religion. As Wittgenstein's work is generally divided in
early and late work, this paper provides two interpretation
regarding religion. His early work – Tractatus Logico-
Philosophicus – can be considered a form of negative theology.
His later work – Philosophical Investigations – offers an
anthropologic method, i.e. the language game, that can be applied
to religion.

Key Words:
●*Religion* ●*Negative theology* ●*The mystical* ●*Form of life* ●*Language game*
●*Science* ●*Truth.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (Vienna, Austria 26 April 1889 – Cambridge,
United Kingdom 29 April 1951) is a well-known philosopher for his
work on logics, philosophy of mathematics, the mind and language. He has
influenced contemporary philosophy – analytical philosophy, pragmatism as
well as postmodernism – and also the social sciences. Many consider him an
idiosyncratic genius, as for example Bertrand Russell. Russell wrote the
introduction to the only book that was published during Wittgenstein's life:
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Actually, Wittgenstein disagreed with Russell's

interpretation, but this was the only way to get the book published; due to its complicated subject matter many publishers refused the manuscript. Wittgenstein started writing notes for this book during World War I, when he was a volunteer soldier for the Austro-Hungarian army (he received several medals for showing courage at the eastern front). Wittgenstein's notebooks and *Philosophical Investigations* were published posthumously.

Wittgenstein always had a love-hate relationship with academic philosophy; he told his students to quite philosophy if they did not have anything original to say; philosophy should be useful and should not be conducted just for its own sake. Wittgenstein left the academic world for periods of time to work as a primary school teacher, a gardener at a monastery, an architect for the house of his sister and in a hospital during World War II.

Wittgenstein was born in a well-to-do family, his family converted to Protestantism from Judaism (the Nazi regime still considered Wittgenstein's family Jewish though). This essay, however, is not a biography or historical account of how Wittgenstein lived religion in his day-to-day life. Wittgenstein wrote, on the other hand, only from time-to-time explicitly on religion, which will be the topic of the following section. The following two sections give interpretations of Wittgenstein's work in the light of religion. The *Tracatus* is discussed in the second section and the *Philosophical Investigations* in the third section. While generally these two books are considered two separate periods in Wittgenstein's thinking, I use them to approach religion from two different directions; on religion there is considerable continuity between these two periods. In the *Tractatus*, he treats metaphysics in general and religion in particular from the perspective of logics. This book claims how we should use language to make sense from a logical perspective. In this early work he claims that logics has nothing to say about meaning, that amounts to nonsense in its logical implication; meaning, on the other hand, can be shown through forms, which we can call aesthetic ethics/ethical aesthetics. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses an anthropological approach to discuss how we actually use language. And we do not only use language to make logical propositions. He speaks then of language-games, and religion can be interpreted as a language-game (Wittgenstein takes religion seriously, we should therefore not take the word 'game' to mean that religion is merely a game). Wittgenstein uses the concept of the language-game to signify that meaning is not in our mind or in the

things themselves but in our use of language. We can use the same word in different contexts and the use in that context gives the word its meaning. We can treat religion as a language-game, because throughout human history we try to find ways to make explicit the profound implicit and to express the unspeakable.

Wittgenstein on Religion

If religion is defined as an institutionalized belief system, then Wittgenstein cannot be considered religious, because neither was he interested in theological doctrines and dogmas, nor in participating in religious activities. He was, however, interested in mystical questions. And he realized that logic does not suffice to provide answers.

One of Wittgenstein's influences was the Russian novelist Count Leo Tolstoy. During World War I, Wittgenstein discovered the book *The Gospel in Brief* by Tolstoy. In this book Tolstoy writes:

> "I was looking for an answer to the question of life and not to theological or historical questions, and so for me the chief question was not whether Jesus was or was not God, or from whom the Holy Ghost proceeded and so forth, and equally unimportant and unnecessary was it for me to know when and by whom each Gospel was written and whether such and such a parable may, or may not, be ascribed to Christ. What was important to me was this light which has enlightened mankind for eighteen hundred years and which enlightened and still enlightens me; but how to name the source of that light, and what materials he or someone else had kindled, did not concern me."[2]

This was an eye-opener for Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus* deals with similar questions (questions Russell overlooked in his introduction); for the writer of the *Tractatus* naming the source of this spirited light amounts to logical nonsense, which is discussed in more detail in the next section. Tolstoy writes that he is not concerned how to name the source of that light, however, it comes under many different names: love, benevolence, justice, truth and, of course, God, the topic of the third section.

Søren Kierkegaard's work was another inspiration source for Wittgenstein.[3] "Wisdom," Wittgenstein notes, "is passionless. But faith by

contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*."[4] Unlike science, faith is colorful,[5] and this colorfulness sets us to contemplate.[6] We should wonder about the miracle that there is existence in the first place, this wonder is overlooked by science, because it only looks at what exists, and scientific explanations put us asleep, because science in general and logic in particular cannot go beyond the existing facts.[7]

Passion cannot be acquired by mere instruction; one has to belief sincerely by showing the intention to live by it. Therefore, philosophy and life should be connected, i.e. if one wants to remain integrity one has apply one's thoughts into one's life.[8] Today, analytical philosophers who study Wittgenstein's work overlook this; philosophy is then merely another form of science. Philosophy ought to have practical implications, according to Wittgenstein, and he, therefore, criticizes Socrates (and Plato): "Reading the Socratic dialogues one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing?" And: "Socrates keeps reducing the sophist to silence, – but does he have *right* on his side when he does this? Well, it is true that the sophist does not know what he thinks he knows; but that is no triumph for Socrates. It can't be a case of 'You see! You don't know it!' – nor yet, triumphantly, of 'So none of us knows anything!'"[9]

Wittgenstein was a perfectionist and he, despite being considered a genius by others, acknowledged his moral imperfection and the improbability of attaining perfection:

> "I never more than half succeed in expressing what I want to express. Actually not as much as that, but by no more than a tenth. That is still worth something. Often my writing is nothing but 'stuttering'. […] A writer far more talented than I would still have only a minor talent."[10]

Both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein saw it as their moral duty to live life to the fullest, and to fulfill this demanding task – this heavy burden – it does not suffice to lower the bar. And for both authors there is a connection between the ethical and the aesthetic – we need forms to express our deepest passion: faith – and between philosophy and aesthetics – we need forms to express our thoughts.[11]

The connection between ethics and aesthetics is further discussed in the next section, but this connection is also discussed in a public lecture Wittgenstein delivered: "A Lecture on Ethics." In this lecture Wittgenstein

claims that aesthetics is essentially connected to ethics, which he defines as the enquiry into the good in the widest sense. Wittgenstein claims then that "instead of saying 'Ethics is the enquiry into what is good' I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living."[12]

Wittgenstein recognizes that there are two forms of the good: the relative and the absolute good. Something is a relative good in relation to a predetermined end, i.e. a relative good is a mean. For example, a road is good if it leads me to my chosen destination; this can also be called instrumental rationality: if we have set a certain end we can calculate the best means to arrive at this end, moreover, this means that I do not have to accept a certain mean if I also do not share the end. An absolute good is entirely different: I ought to value it and I ought to act accordingly. Wittgenstein claims then that "although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value [compare David Hume: we cannot derive an *ought* from what *is* the case]."[13] Therefore, no factual proposition can express the sublime. The ultimate important cannot be expressed through words. However, if we can live a life with faith instead of despair then we will experience the world in an entirely different way, i.e. with hope, the hope that we are not ultimately alone. Faith, however, is no easy matter.[14]

That faith is no easy matter also comes to the fore in "Lectures on Religious Belief." Wittgenstein says: "A belief isn't like a momentary state of mind."[15] Faith is, he claims, unshakeable, i.e. it cannot be falsified. Moreover, it does not appeal to falsifiable reasons, i.e. it cannot be proven false. The word 'believe' is here not used in its normal connotation, e.g. 'I believe that it will rain this afternoon' is a different statement from 'I believe in God'. The same goes for 'to know', e.g. 'I know that he lives in Bandung' is different from 'I know that God resides in the heavens above'. Faith does not use hypotheses of which we can test the validity and probability. Even when religions make use of a historical narrative, such a narrative is different from how historians look at history. Faith is not an opinion, nor does faith apply doubt as in science, therefore, Wittgenstein claims, dogma can be considered a synonym of faith.[16] However, from the fact that scientific methods cannot be applied to faith, we cannot conclude that faith is merely a fairy tale – faith and science are different language games, as discussed in the third section.

The sublime is then the mystical wonder at existence, even though we cannot imagine that the world could not have existed. Wittgenstein sums his ethics up by claiming that "[w]hat is good is also divine."[17] And since the divine is outside the space of facts, religion runs

> "Against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. […] But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it."[18]

That what cannot be expressed through logical propositions can be shown is discussed in the next section. In the third section it is discussed that we actually do try to express the absolute valuable by running 'against the walls of our cage' and by trying to transcend this worldly 'cage' (a clear reference to Plato's allegory) by forming religions.

Religion as Aesthetic Ethics/Ethical Aesthetics

That we are unable to make the divine explicit through our language can be considered a form of negative theology. "In consequence," Stephen D. Moore writes, "negative theology can be said to be a self-subverting discourse that systematically showcases its own inadequacy to the theological task of enclosing God in concepts – a stuttering disruption of the confident assertions of conventional theological discourse."[19] The infinite is thus absence. However, we can shape our being and actions in aesthetic forms to show a moral – and religious – outlook on our being and acting in the world.

"What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."[20] That does not mean, though, that what cannot be said has no meaning, that what cannot be said can be shown. For Ludwig Wittgenstein silence has profound meaning.

Philosophy shows "that meaning is a practical affair."[21] Ethics is not a theoretical discipline: we do not ask what the good for human beings is simply because we want to acquire knowledge, but because doing so we will be better able to live well. We have to give meaning to things. Things are mere things and we give them meaning through a continuous process of (re-

)interpretation and (re-)valuation. The practical affair of giving meaning is therefore not only a human, all too human thing to do – to speak with Friedrich Nietzsche – it is something that is done extrinsically. Values do not exist intrinsically, there are no essences to discover, and this is thus an anti-essentialist perspective.

Philosophers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein criticize the eternal Platonic Ideas. Even if essences do exist, we have no means to make sense of them. They claim we have to see our ignorance as a virtue. They claim that we need to realize that there exists a void from where we can start creating values as if our own life is to become an art piece. This is a quest against nihilism.

We should not forget, on the other hand, that creating values is not a solitary affair, even Nietzsche refutes this.[22] It is thus impossible to give meaning in solitude, we value within a web of relationships, i.e. we cannot create *ex nihilo* (that is God's privilege). It is also impossible to create values that have only meaning to the creator (Wittgenstein calls this the impossibility of a 'private language').

For Wittgenstein "philosophy is a 'critique of language' […]."[23] In the *Tracatatus,* Wittgenstein tries to draw the boundaries of language, and he claims "that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)"[24] That means that the absolute good can only be shown by styling ourselves in a certain way, therefore we have to consider ethics and aesthetics as a union: aesthetic ethics and ethical aesthetics.[25] It is through aesthetic self-styling that we show ourselves ethically.

Ethical values cannot be put in words or expressed through them, these values can only be aesthetically shown through styling our actions. According to Wittgenstein, values do not represent reality; values are not about the truth (as understood in logics). The ethical and aesthetic are about "'how' we express something rather than of 'what' we say (about it)."[26]

We show our own life not in an abstract, rational language, but through a form or style. Kathrin Stengel comments on Wittgenstein:

> "Style also reveals a person's perspective on the world. A person cannot but speak or write in 'his or her style' and in doing so reveal his or her attitude toward life and the world. The attitude thus manifested indicates an ethical perspective, as the meaning of life is not something that we can create without using value judgments. Style, therefore, expresses ethical values in and through aesthetic form. More specifically, style offers a

perspective on the fundamental value of all values: our own lives."[27]

Thus we understand the world ethically through an aesthetic form.

If the 'I' is not a mere collection of contingencies – random bones, organs, veins, skin tissue, experiences, sensations, desires, thoughts, et cetera – then the transcendental perspective is important. It is what Wittgenstein calls the perspective of eternity. From this unique perspective, we can see our very own life as a work of art. Through the perspective of eternity we sublimate ourselves.

The world, according to Wittgenstein, is as it is: "everything is as it is, and happens as it does happen."[28] The world as it is, does not contain meaning; we have to give it value. We make the contingent world a valuable place to live in. From the perspective of eternity we give meaning to the present by seeing it caused for reasons. Stengel concludes:

> "While the ethical shows itself only through aesthetic form, the aesthetic shows itself only as an ethical perspective on life. This perspective, though it discloses an individual view, is already universal, for it necessarily implies a notion of eternity […]."[29]

Not so much what we say but how we style it, the form of what we say is important. Therefore, Wittgenstein can claim that what he wrote is important, but equally important for him is what he did not write. David Rozema calls the *Tractatus* a poem: just as white lines have meaning in a poem so has passed over silence meaning. The content is expressed in a form, i.e. a form of life: a life should be lived and not just be theorized.[30]

In ethics and aesthetics we aspire for perfection, even though there are no given ideals:

> "The ideal is expressed not by articulating it directly but by giving concrete examples, drawing comparisons or contrasts. Such examples may be other works in the history of the same genre, or in another genre, or even invented for the purpose. […] Style, metaphor, analogy, the aspect of things, the *face* of concepts, examples – whether concrete or fictitious – become a part of the toolbox of the creative philosopher."[31]

The things in the world exist contingently, and therefore, according to Wittgenstein, without value, because values do not exist contingently. The

self is the source of ethical and aesthetic values.[32] Wittgenstein is not saying that empirical facts are irrelevant, but that their value cannot be explained by a reference to these facts. For Wittgenstein, philosophy is a criticism of language, and values cannot be expressed in or through propositional language, thus philosophy, as a negative conclusion, cannot say anything about meaning.

Ethics, for Wittgenstein, is what gives meaning to our world.[33] The self that values is not a part of the empirical world, because that would make the self an ordinary fact in the world, which has no moral value. The moral self can change the limits of the world: "the world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man."[34] The world requires a self as a subject that is able to constitute a unity. "The metaphysical subject can give ethical meaning to life through the way in which it views the world as a whole."[35] To create a structure in the world of facts is an aesthetic activity: it is to see the world as a piece of art to sublimate the contingent world.

Ethics for Wittgenstein starts from a non-logical necessity: to give meaning where there is no meaning. Ethics tries to go beyond the world of facts; it gives structure, so we can live a meaningful life in this contingent world. This structure is not a fact of this world; we presuppose this structure on to the world. Ethics is thus transcendental, because it is not a part of the world of facts, but without this transcendental perspective there would only be arbitrary facts. That the world of the happy man is different from the unhappy man indicates that there are a variety ethical perspectives, because there are many different ways to be happy and unhappy. And we do not have the scientific tools to decide which ethical perspective is the best, the truest.

To exemplify this we can look at the difference between the Old Testament (the Jewish holy book the Torah) and the New Testament. In the Old Testament we can read many categorical imperatives, for example the Ten Commandments. This contrasts with the New Testament. The only categorical imperative of the New Testament is that we ought to love. The meaning of love, however, is not defined in propositional language; it is, on the other hand, shown from different perspectives in fragmentary accounts of the life of Jesus. Jesus shows the meaning of love in his interactions with significant others and this is shown in the Gospels.

Robert Hull writes that "Nietzsche reads the Gospels as if they were a messy novel, written by multiple authors, whose central character is drawn sometimes convincely as, and sometimes the antitheses of, an *euangelion*."[36]

Jesus is thus the message as well as the messenger. Jesus' words and actions are signs for what cannot be expressed in ordinary – including theological – discourse. What we can emphasize in such a literary reading is not a doctrine or theory but a mode of living an authentic life: Jesus practiced how we can live our life, and if we do, heaven can be experienced in our own life.

Just as the Cartesian mind-body dualism is nonsense, so is it impossible to separate style from content. We show meaning through styling it in a certain ways and not in other ways. Downgrading style to mere decoration, Susan Sontag writes in "Against Interpretation," reduces 'reading' the content to an intellectual exercise, separating it from the body of life, to make it safe, manageable. Reading should change our life and not leave us indifferent.[37] Love should not merely be understood intellectually, it should become part of every fiber of our body, so to speak, and only if love is internalized we will act accordingly.

Aristotle gives in the *Nicomachean Ethics* another reason why such a reading of the New Testament makes sense. He claims that there is no possibility of writing a book of rules, however long, that will serve as a complete guide to prudent decision-making. He, therefore, emphasizes *phronesis*, i.e. the prudence to interpret a situation to make a moral decision and to act upon that decision. I return to this in the next section.

Religion as a Language-Game

Charles Taylor asks the following important question: "What is the point of articulacy of the good?"[38] The writer of the *Tractatus* tells us to pass it over in solemn silence. "But articulation, Taylor claims, "is a necessary condition of adhesion […]."[39] Without articulation, he argues, the good is no option. And articulation should be understood in its widest implications to include all sorts of speech acts (speech acts include all forms of meaningful communication; a wink, for example, can be considered a speech act but a blink cannot be considered so).[40] Thus, Taylor claims that if we do not want to live a trivial and contingent life, we need to recognize horizons of significance. And making these horizons explicit requires a dialogical attitude; we cannot define ourselves nor the good without that what exceeds us, i.e. the other as well *the* Other – horizontal as well as vertical transcendentalism. The good is then made explicit in dialog with significant others,[41] which brings us to, what Wittgenstein calls, language-games. In the

Tractatus he tells us to pass over the good in silence, but he also notes that "[i]t is a great temptation to try to make the spirit explicit."[42] He sums it up as:

> "If someone who believes in God looks round and asks 'Where does everything I see come from?', 'Where does all this come from?', he is *not* craving for a (causal) explanation; and his question gets its point from being the expression of a certain craving. He is, namely, expressing an attitude to all explanations. – But how is this manifested in his life?"[43]

And this is manifested in the existing religions and their theologies; to describe these manifestations in our lives, we can use Wittgenstein's anthropological approach to meaning.

Wittgenstein goes against the common academic practice of reflection with infinite regress. He does not believe in treating research objects as atoms that can be isolated from a context. They can only function – and thus analyzed and understood – relationally and contextually. Science, Wittgenstein claims, is not about "facts; but […] turns of speech."[44] Words do not contain in themselves meaning, i.e. they do not have an essence. Meaning, on the other hand, is shown in the use of words, therefore, we have to look at the social context. Wittgenstein's approach is thus this-worldly.

How to create meaning in a world where all facts are contingent? We can see meaning, though, not so much in certain facts, but in a dialogical attitude. A self comes into existence through acting as a part of social practices. Intersubjectivity comes thus logically as well as empirically prior to subjectivity. I can only reflect upon myself through familiarizing myself with others. I cannot explain myself independently from interpersonal relationships. "Personhood arises in a network of relationships between concretely configured acting individuals. The emergence of the 'I am' springs from the social 'We can'."[45]

The other is my mirror as well as I am a mirror for the other. The self cannot reflect without public meaning, symbols (language) and concepts. The dialogical approach is such that "I act toward the other as I assume she will act toward the meaning of my act and I shape my act so that it will be 'read' as having a particular 'significance' and so prefigure a particular interpretation and appropriate response from her."[46]

"The 'I'," writes Barry Sandywell, "is not a noun but a verb: indexing

interpretive processes shaped by exchanges with other interpretive agents."[47] We are not born with an essential identity. Shaping an identity does not mean we have to search for an essence deep inside of ourselves to be brought out in the open. We form and perform an identity through acting and interacting with others and our environment, i.e. performativity. That also means that an identity is never fixed as long as we act and interact. So says Nietzsche: "We separate ourselves, the doers, from the deed […], we have taken the will to do this or that for a cause because the action follows upon it […]. [O]ne should take the doer back into the deed […]."[48] Just as ethics and aesthetics, style and content, theory and practice, and message and messenger are connected, so are doer and deed connected.

Meaning is thus not in the mind of the Cartesian self. Meaning, on the other hand, is shown in its use. In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein writes: "But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*. […] The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. Roughly: understanding a sentence means understanding a language."[49] And in the *Philosophical Investigations* he adds: "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[50] Explaining meaning is thus at the end self-referential and circular, and a reference to 'the mind' is no way out of this vicious circle.

Meaning is not exterior but interior to use. Philosophy of language takes thus an anthropological turn. The philosopher has to see how words are put to use and Wittgenstein says: "don't think, but look!"[51] And to look at how language is used is to look at particular cases instead of generalizations, so there is no longer room for philosophical foundations or grounding. Wittgenstein insists "on relationality and on social context […]."[52] Traditional philosophizing, on the other hand, leads to infinite regress, and, in the end, it leads to atomistic reduction.

Wittgenstein is critical of philosophers who are in the need of a metalanguage, i.e. a language that justifies to hold 'X' over 'Y' as valid, true, beautiful, right or just.[53] Instead he looks at particular examples from different perspectives without viewing these examples as paradigm cases. Wittgenstein compares and notes dissimilarities.[54] He wants us "to *look at* [the word's] use and learn from that."[55] So doing, we will not essentialize the word or look at it for significance, no matter how much we are prejudiced to do so.

Philosophizing is not "to find words to hit on the correct nuance," however, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."[56] This means that Wittgenstein does not focus on words,[57] but on the lives in which those words are used.

Meaning – and normativity – are not subjective (whether constructed by the mind or feelings), but reflexive and intersubjective. Meaning is thus agreement in use. David Boor writes:

> "Normative standards come from the consensus generated by a number of interacting rule followers, and it is maintained by collectively monitoring, controlling and sanctioning their individual tendencies. Consensus makes norms objective, that is, a source of external and impersonal constraint on the individual. It gives substance to the distinction between rule followers thinking they have got it right, and their having really got it right. (17)"[58]

The meaning of a word is unfixed, because a word attains meaning as part of an activity. There are a multiplicity of uses and thus of meanings. Language is fluid and its use is diversified. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor 'language-game' to explain this.[59] A language-game is part of a form of life. And there is no possibility to give a final definition of a language-game; therefore, we cannot define "what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or part of language."[60]

A language-game depends on the constituting and regulating rules of that game. These rules can be understood as conventions. David Boor concludes that

> "(1) a rule is a social institution, (2) following a rule is participating in a social institution, and (3) an institution can usefully be analyzed in terms of collective processes having a self-referring or performative character. The […] facts of meaning are the facts of institutional membership. Meaning is a social phenomenon."[61]

We need judgement to perform rules, because rules are open-ended. Institutional rules can be indeterminate, they might not be clear or in conflict. Rules, therefore, need interpretation. This becomes even more apparent when we realize that we all play several roles, i.e. we participate in several language-games, and so we need to make priorities.

Interpretation does not create meaning and when interpretation is required it cannot mean that anything goes, i.e. an infinite regression. Interpretation also follows rules, i.e. finitism, otherwise an interpretation regresses infinitely to other interpretations.[62] Compare this again with Aristotle's claim that a book of rules cannot include everything. Learning how one should act means that one looks at those significant others who succeed in this: the women and men who already possess *phronesis* already know how to perform meaning.

Religion in general can be considered a form of life and particular religions can then be considered language-games with a family resemblance among them. There is, of course, a stronger family resemblance among Christian factions or Islamic ones. To make this explicit it is helpful to look at how the postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard and the pragmatist Richard Rorty put the concept 'language-game' to use.

Jean-François Lyotard defines in his book *The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge* postmodernism as the end of all metanarratives or grand narratives. Instead of metanarratives, Lyotard proposes small narratives with a local determinism. These localized narratives are connected to what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls 'language-games'. And there is a multiplicity of language-games with their own rules without an overarching rule-system. Lyotard makes "three observations about language games. The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players […]. The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game […]. The third remark [… is that] every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game."[63] And every utterance is a part in a power struggle and "the observable social bond is composed of language 'moves'."[64] Asking what the social bond constitutes is already participating in a language game. And a language-game can be altered – even if it is institutionalized – by making unexpected 'moves', i.e. renegotiation. You are excluded – ostracized – from a language game if you do not accept its rules. For Lyotard, the small narrative is the remaining form, metaconsensus, therefore, should be considered as outmoded and suspect.[65]

Rorty calls French thinkers like Lyotard 'masters of suspicion'. According to Rorty, we should not treat the different life-worlds as perfectly autonomous. Rorty tells us not to worry too much about the (lack of) common ground between the different life-worlds. "What is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue – tolerance, irony, and a willingness to

let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their 'common ground', their unification, the 'intrinsic ideals' they suggest, or what picture of man they 'presuppose'."[66] Escaping from institutions, as Lyotard wants for fear of oppression, is, according to Rorty, not necessarily good, because it does not value consensus and communication. There is a clear contradiction when Lyotard claims that metaconsensus is outdated and suspect and still considering justice as a value. Justice without consensus is a utopia. While there is no metajustification possible of 'we', we still need a sense of 'us', of 'community' to make justice real.[67] All our justifications are circular, because they are conducted in a final vocabulary of a contingent 'language game'. At the end, "[*w*]*e* have to start from where *we* are […]."[68] Along history, our capability to use language grows because we keep on inventing new metaphors. Rorty thus looks at usefulness. "A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than filling-up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one's language and one's life, rather than a proposal about how to systemize either."[69]

Beside that Rorty is more pragmatic concerning metajustifications, he disagrees with Lyotard that language-games are strictly compartmentalized. Some examples help to explain when what use makes sense.

The main character in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, Piscine 'Pi' Molitor Patel, becomes a follower of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Pi says: "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God […]. If there's only one nation in the sky, shouldn't all passports be valid for it?"[70] This enrages followers of the respective religions. And they are right to be enraged. While the different religions have a family resemblance among them, there are substantial differences. A perspective shapes our outlook on the world in fundamental ways. While all religions profess a love for God, meaning of a religion is in its details for believers.

Rorty's liberal irony is unlikely to solve this conflict. Perhaps a more current issue is the ongoing debate between believers and (secular) scientists. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins claims that faith gives a false sense of certainty. After 9/11 he goes a step further, not only is faith an illusion it is also dangerous:

> "Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which

> automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others labeled only by a difference of inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism."[71]

What Dawkins forgets is that, for example, 'truth' has a different use and thus a different meaning in the language-game religion and the language-game science. These are separate language-games responding to different questions and needs.

However, a scientist can very well be religious; Rorty is right that language-games are not strictly compartmentalized. Science has nothing to say about how existence came into existence. Moreover, modern science does not necessarily demystify the world. And terms from one language-game can be used as a metaphor in another language-game.

By seeing an individual person merely through the perspective of a single language-game – community, culture, religion or civilization – is to reduce that person to a single dimension. We participate in many different language-games. Well before civilizations can clash, we have already limited the scope to a single perspective. Then we fall in the trap of stereotypes – sometimes with good intention. That all Muslims are (potential) terrorists is as much nonsense as claiming that all Muslims are by definition peace lovers. Amartya Sen says that we have "to distinguish between (1) the various affiliations and loyalties a person who happens to be a Muslim has, and (2) his or her Islamic identity in particular."[72] We will miss subtle differences if we only focus on the second. Moreover, from an anthropological perspective it is important to remember that religions are born from particular cultural needs. And even when religions claim to be universally valid, when they travel around the globe they will adapt to new contexts (anthropologists call this acculturation).

Wittgenstein writes in the closing pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* that "[i]f a lion could talk, we could not understand him."[73] A lion simply leads a different form of life. Just as meaning and interpretations are finite, so must difference be finite. When Wittgenstein refers to form of life, he is actually referring to the human form of life. This leaves room for a weak form of universalism. It is human to express meaning through the use of language, even if this transcends propositional language. So while actual expressions are contingent, expressing meaning is a human necessity.[74]

End Notes:

[1]   Roy Voragen, from the Netherlands, lives in Indonesia since 2003 and he teaches philosophy and political science at Parahyangan University, Bandung; his weblog: http://fatumbrutum.blogspot.com/.

[2]   Leo Tolstoy, *The Gospel in Brief*, trans. Aylmer Maude, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13597003/Tolstoy-Gospel-in-Brief> (13 May 2009).

[3]   Charles L. Creegan, *From Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard: Religion, Individuality and Philosophical Method,* 1989*,* <http://home.clear.net.nz/pages/ccreegan/wk/chapter1.html> (13 May 2009). Also Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of Spheres, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/12956807/kierkegaard-and-wittgenstein-on-philosophy-and-religion> (15 May 2009).

[4]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 53.

[5]   Wittgenstein, 62.

[6]   Wittgenstein, 66.

[7]   Wittgenstein, 5.

[8]   "Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's own way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)" Wittgenstein, 16. See also Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991); also Ray Monk, "Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding," *Poetics Today* 28, no.3 (2007): 527-70.

[9]   Wittgenstein, 14, 56.

[10]   Wittgenstein, 18, 75.

[11]   "The queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation […] and an aesthetical one […]." Wittgenstein, 25.

[12]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no.1 (January 1965), 5.

[13]   Wittgenstein, 6.

[14]   "If life becomes hard to bear we think of a change in our circumstances. But the most important and effective change, a change in our own attitude, hardly even occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us." Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 53.

[15]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Religious Belief," in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 54.

[16]   Wittgenstein, 57.

[17]   Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 3.

[18]   Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," 12.

[19]   Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, *Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 24.

[20]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F.

McGuinness, intro. Bertrand Russell (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

[21] M.J. Bowles, "The practice of meaning in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 26 (2003), 12.

[22] Bowles, 13.

[23] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, section 4.0031, 19.

[24] Wittgenstein, section 6.421, 71.

[25] Kathrin Stengel, "Ethics as style: Wittgenstein's Aesthetic ethics and ethical aesthetics," *Poetics Today* 25, no.4 (Winter 2004), 612.

[26] Stengel, 616.

[27] Stengel, 616-7.

[28] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* section 6.41, 71.

[29] Stengel, "Ethics as style," 623.

[30] David Rozema, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: A 'Poem' by Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no.2 (2002), 345.

[31] Béla Szabados, "What is the role of the arts and aesthetics in Wittgenstein's philosophy?" <http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_10/wittgenstein/szabados_intro.htm> (26 May 2009).

[32] John C. Kelly, "Wittgenstein, the Self, and Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 48, no.3 (March 1995), 570.

[33] Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," 5

[34] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* section 6.43, 72.

[35] Kelly, "Wittgenstein, the Self, and Ethics," 573; also Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* section 6.45, 73.

[36] Robert Hull, "Nietzsche's Jesus," *Nebulu* 4, no.1 (March 2007), 107, <http://www.nobleworld.biz/images/hull.pdf> (26 February 2009).

[37] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), 8, 14.

[38] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91.

[39] Taylor.

[40] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts, An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 16.

[41] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33.

[42] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 8.

[43] Wittgenstein, 85

[44] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968)*,* section 295, 101.

[45] Barry Sandywell, *Reflexivity and the Crisis of Western Reason, Logological Investigations, Volume I* (London: Routledge, 1996), 255.

[46] Sandywell, 259.

[47] Sandywell, 261.

[48] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The will to power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), section 551, 295; and section 675, 356. Judith Butler writes that it is "clearly unfortunate grammar to claim that there is a 'we' or an 'I' [or mind] that does its body, as if a disembodied

agency preceded and directed an embodied exterior." Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution, An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (December 1988), 521.

[49] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 4-5.

[50] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 43, 20.

[51] Wittgenstein, section 66, 31.

[52] Steven Shaviro, "From Language to 'Forms of Life': Theory and Practice in Wittgenstein," *Social Text*, no.13/14 (1986), 217.

[53] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 121, 49, and section 192, 77.

[54] Wittgenstein, section 130, 50, section 164, 66, and section 295, 100-1.

[55] Wittgenstein, section 340, 109.

[56] Wittgenstein, section 254, 91, and section 19, 8.

[57] Wittgenstein, section 370, 116.

[58] David Boor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (Florence: Routledge, 1997), 17.

[59] Hans-Johann Glock, "Language-game," in *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[60] Wittgenstein, section 65, 31.

[61] Boor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions*, 134.

[62] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, second edition), section 229, 40.

[63] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 10.

[64] Lyotard, 11.

[65] Lyotard, 66.

[66] Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 171.

[67] Rorty, 175.

[68] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 198.

[69] Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13.

[70] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2001), 87, 93.

[71] "Has the world changed?" *The Guardian*, 11 October 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/11/afghanistan.terrorism2> (24 May 2009). The novelist J.G. Ballard, however, contests this in the same interview. In his novel *Super-Cannes* "one of the characters says that the future will increasingly be seen as a struggle between psychosities; so many of the people we see involved in this conflict [Bush vs. Bin Laden] are clearly mad." Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders made the short movie 'Fitna', in which he argues along similar lines as Dawkins:
1a. Terrorism is real;
1b. terrorism is committed by Muslims;
1c. these terrorists commit terrorism in the name of Islam;
1d. these Muslims justify terrorism based on Quranic verses.
2a. There are Quranic verses permitting violence;

2b. there are Quranic verses directed against non-Muslims.
From which Wilders concludes:
3a. All non-Muslims are potential targets of terrorism;
3b. because all Muslims are potential terrorists;
3c. and if Muslims want to remain citizens of Western liberal-democracies they have to censor their holy book.
The conclusion, though, does not follow from the premises. Geert Wilders, "Fitna the Movie (New Version 4-4-2008),"
<http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=216_1207467783> (25 May 2009). Roy Voragen, "Freedom of Expression running wild, wilder, Wilders," *The Jakarta Post*, 14-3-8, 6, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/03/13/freedom-expression-running-wild-wilder-wilders.html> (28 May 2009).

[72] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence, The Illusion of Destiny* (Princeton: W.W. Norton, 2007), 61.

[73] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 223.

[74] Greg Hill, "Solidarity, Objectivity, and the Human Form of Life: Wittgenstein vs. Rorty," *Critical Review* 11, no.4 (Fall 1997): 555-80.

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