



[Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen
Frankfurt am Main – Virtueller Leseraum](#)

[Heinrich Watzka SJ](#)

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Antirealism and Theism

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For an adherent of Wittgenstein it seems to be hopeless to find some arguments in favour of the rationality of theistic belief. The reason is Wittgenstein's alleged anti-foundationalism which pertains if foundationalism means that a belief is a rational belief only if it can be related to a set of propositions which constitute the foundations of what we believe. Most of us presume that belief in God is not among these foundational propositions. So it stands in need of proof, justification, warrant, grounds etc. As Phillips puts it: "...asking whether belief in God is rational quickly becomes a matter of seeking evidence for the existence of God. Such evidence... will constitute the foundation of the belief." (Phillips 1988, 3) People who propound this sort of evidentialism normally tend to assimilate belief in God to other kinds of belief, whereas Wittgenstein is concerned to deny any continuity at all between religious belief and, for instance, scientific belief: "The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business. Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me [as a believer]." (Wittgenstein 1966, 56)

The "groundlessness" of our belief granted, is there a way of explaining how expressions of religious language could be, at least, meaningful? According to anti-realism, as a theory of meaning, understanding through language consists in the ability to assign degrees of confirmation to statements. The statement (resp. the 'thought') is considered as an object to which an interpretation is added by "assertability conditions", that is, by a method of verification. Interpreters such as Kripke, Rorty, and Crispin Wright identify the Wittgensteinian "technique of usage" with such assertability conditions. More cautiously, Dummett nowadays speaks of "justificationist" instead of "verificationist" semantics: "...in the sense in which the intuitionist interpretation of mathematical statements may be termed 'justificationist'" (Dummett 1993, 475). It is the notion of proof, as it figures in the intuitionist semantics for mathematical statements, which serves Dummett as the analogue for the semantics of all other sorts of statements, although it is by no means clear to what extent this analogy is valid in the case of empirical statements. Be that as it may, this idea fits well into a normative picture of language whereby language is conceived of as a special

case of “rule-guided activity” (Glock 1996, 323). In this view a speaker manifests his attachment to a particular sense of a given expression “...by displaying his ability to use it correctly in some canonical range of contexts” (Dummett 1991, 149). In the domain of religious belief, unlike the empirical, the meaning of our expressions would rest solely upon social agreement. No actual or possible sense experience can, in fact, settle the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever, the proponent of the personal nature of God and the opponent of such a view, etc. As a believer I am still on the *right semantic track* so long as my verbal usages agree with those of *my* religious community. Certain answers are given to certain questions posed in the course of playing a language-game which is normally accompanied by various forms of ritual. My faith cannot, by any means, be assessed from outside, and would probably not even be understood anyway. If this is the core of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, Ayer’s ironical comment is right: “This position has the advantage of being thoroughly ecumenical. There need be no more discussion between Protestants and Roman Catholics, or between Hindus and Moslems, than there is between those who like playing poker and those who like playing chess. All the same I am surprised that religious believers find it satisfactory. I am not myself a religious believer but if I were I doubt if I should be content to be told that I was playing a game in accordance with a canonical set of rules. Rather, I should wish for some assurance that my belief were true.” (Ayer 1985, 92)

It is traditionally held that a philosophical defense of theism would be more promising within a (semantically) realist framework. Let us look whether the anti-realist view of the later Wittgenstein is really cogent. I agree with Putnam whose own realism has in recent years been increasingly influenced by a reading of Wittgenstein, which stresses a “second naïveté” about our conceptual access to the things we talk and think about (Putnam 1994, 489). Wittgenstein, in this reading, represents exactly the type incriminated by Dummett as a “naive realist”, - except in the field of mathematics and scientific theory formation. The naive realist, in Dummett’s view, is unable to answer the question in virtue of what a statement of the “disputed class” (e.g. sentences about the past, the future, mental states, etc.) is true, when it is true. Since he rejects the “reductionist thesis” (that the truth of the sentences of the “disputed class” has always to be explained in terms of “assertability conditions”) he has no informative answer to this: “...he can give only a circular answer, that [e.g.] the statement, ‘The Andromeda galaxy rotates’, if true, is true in virtue of the rotation of the Andromeda galaxy... He can only cite, as rendering true a specific statement of the disputed class, the truth of some or more statements of the same class.” (Dummett 1991, 328) It is exactly the incriminated circularity of the description of the use of words, that means the lack of descriptions of the relevant situations by sentences of the “reductive class”, which manifests the latent realism in Wittgenstein’s later work. We need, according to Putnam, a fundamentally different way of conceiving Wittgensteinian *use*. On this alternative picture “...the use of words in a language game cannot, in most cases, be described without employing the vocabulary of that game or a vocabulary internally related to the vocabulary of that game” (Putnam 1994, 458). Even in the domain of “inner states”, which are said to stand in need of

“outward criteria”, our search for behavioral evidence may come to an impasse. In part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is discussing the case that an agreement over the question, “whether an expression of feeling is genuine or not”, is not attained, whereas agreement, e.g. in the judgments of colours, is far from dispute. “I am sure, *sure*, that he is pretending; but some third person is not. Can I always convince him?” He concedes that there is such a thing as “expert judgment” about the genuineness of expressions of feelings, and that such a knowledge can be learnt. Yet: “What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules.” (Wittgenstein 1958, 227) Wittgenstein never claimed that ‘truth’ is an epistemic notion nor that all concepts have criteria, and that the only form of explanation of meaning consists in elaborating criteria for the use of an expression: “For [he] was not involved in any enterprise that could rightly be called the construction of a theory of meaning.” (Hacker 1986, 318) So for systematic reasons he did not stand in need of renouncing realism. Following Wittgenstein, we are not forced to hold that, among other things, our theistic belief is “about nothing”, or that words like ‘God’ do not refer to anything.

Yet, believe in God cannot be proved. How, then, can it be shown that it is, at least, not irrational to believe in God? Surprisingly, the question of theism is bound together with the question of (epistemological) realism in a remark dating back to 1950 when Wittgenstein was working on a series of reflections, *On Certainty*, initiated by a discussion of Moore’s defense of common sense realism. The concept of ‘object’ plays the role of an intermediary link between both issues, between theism and realism. Here the remark: “Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which shows us the ‘existence of this being’, but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give us rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, - life can force this concept on us. So perhaps it is similar to the concept of ‘object’.” (*Culture and Value*, 86)

What is at stake with ‘objects’? ‘Object’ has a logical and a metaphysical use. The logical use is relevant, for instance, when the symbolism of a formal language is introduced and we are told that the variable name ‘x’ refers to *individuals*, single *objects*, etc. ‘Object’ marks, in this respect, a “pseudo-concept” (*Tractatus* 4.1272). Another example is the statement ‘A is a physical object’ which serves as a “piece of instruction” which we give to someone who doesn’t understand either what ‘A’ means, or what ‘physical object’ means. “Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and ‘physical object’ is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, ...)” (*On Certainty* §36) An example of the metaphysical use of ‘object’ would be the statement ‘there are physical objects’ which is, in Wittgenstein’s opinion, nonsense. Statements like this represent a “...misfiring attempt to express what can’t be expressed like that” (*On Certainty* §35). So it would not be an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, nor could realism be confirmed by it. Does that mean that idealism still figures as a reasonable option in the late Wittgenstein? Certainly, realism or the

thought 'there are (physical) objects' does not function as a hypothesis, as it did in the transition period 1929/ 30 when Wittgenstein favoured phenomenalism. At that time the "hypothesis of a world of material objects" was held as unavoidable "...in view of its simplicity when compared with the unmanageably complicated phenomenological description" (Wittgenstein 1975, 286). Reality was conceived of as the totality of *phenomena* whereas the talk of a physical world worked as hypothesis, i.e. as "means of description". Idealism marking the metaphysician's answer to the defiance of the sceptic had to parry the rejection of all knowledge claims. Wittgenstein, at that time, did not realize that the metaphysician and the sceptic were one and the same, i.e. that the metaphysician's craving for certainty was responsible for the rise of scepticism (Watzka 2000, ch.2). The late Wittgenstein never refuted scepticism, instead he reallocated the logical role of sentences like 'there are physical objects'. This sentence can, no longer, play the role of a hypothesis. It was never meant as an empirical assertion. It does not express a metaphysical truth, as the doctrinal realist thinks. So there remains little for it to do. It is surely not "properly basic" by its nature, so it cannot bear the weight of our entire noetic structure. Realism cannot "be proved by means of it" (*On Certainty* §59). How certain, then, is realism concerning the existence of the physical world in *On Certainty*?

Realism, held by common sense, does not result from arguments (e.g., demonstrating the meaninglessness of sceptical objections, switching to causal explanations of intentionality, reference, etc.). The point is the factual absence of doubt, not that doubt itself is impossible. Cavell, in his creative reading of the late Wittgenstein, stresses the fact that the notion of 'criteria', as often held, was not purported to silence the sceptic. Criteria are "disappointing" (Cavell 1979, 79), they "...do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements" (Cavell 1979, 45). So the threat of scepticism is irrefutable, marking an irresistible trait of the "human form of life". Wittgenstein does not yield to our desire for certainty, as the following objection shows: "But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know." (*On Certainty* § 35) It cannot be *known*, in the normal sense of the word, that 'I was born', that 'the earth has existed for many years', that 'there are material objects', that 'the person who shows the right pain behavior, normally, is not pretending'. We do not investigate the truth or falsity of these propositions, and we do not know what to do in order to find out that they are correct. The absence of any investigation or proof, forms a substantial part of the concepts which are relevant here. How, then, is it that I begin to believe in those things, and once questioned, would defend them, seek grounds, etc.? A child, says Wittgenstein, does not learn that, e.g., the mountain in front of it has existed for a long time, "...that is, the question whether it is so doesn't arise at all. It swallows this consequence down, so to speak, together with *what* it learns." (*On Certainty* §143) Informal (unconscious?) reasoning plays a crucial part in the formation of our noetic structure: "The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to those beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is

rather held fast by what lies around it.” (*On Certainty* §144) Convictions like ‘there are physical objects’ form a part of our “world picture”, they are said to be “basical” in respect of all our knowledge claims. Wittgenstein denies that we *presuppose* the truth of them in our assertions, reasoning, etc., as if the truth of all our judgments rested on them. Factually, they get their sense from the “rest of our procedure of asserting” (*On Certainty* §153). They are held fast by all that *surrounds* them.

There is a structural analogy between belief in God and belief in the existence of the physical world, or other minds: both determine our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general; they are not candidates for being *known*, “where knowing construes itself as being certain” (Cavell 1979, 45); they benefit from the holistic character of our world picture; they reflect our willingness to trust our senses, reason, memory, testimony of others, etc. But, so the objection, what distinguishes them from myth, or ideology? As Wittgenstein puts it: “...one can instruct a child to believe in a God, or that none exists, and it will accordingly be able to produce apparently telling grounds for the one or the other” (*On Certainty* §107). At this point the irresistibility of scepticism, according to Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, can preserve us from the short-circuit of the sociologist’s view on our epistemic practices. The community cannot relieve me of the responsibility for what I trust in, or resist to trust. Above all community cannot relieve me of doubt, uncertainty, solitude. The world picture Wittgenstein speaks of is “*my world-picture*”, the “substratum of all *my* enquiring and asserting” (*On Certainty* §162, italics added by H.W.). The step from scepticism to realism, from unbelief to belief in God is not manageable by community, culture, environment, etc. “Life can educate one to believe in God. And *experiences* too..., sufferings of various sorts... Experiences, thoughts, - life can force this concept on us.” (*Culture and Value*, 86). The indispensable *I* echos the traditional epistemologist’s standpoint, even in the domain of theistic belief.

Summary

According to the received view, anti-foundationalism and anti-realism in the late Wittgenstein frustrate our need for a rational assessment of theistic belief. An alternative view is presented in a remark dating back to 1950, when Wittgenstein discussed Moore’s defense of common sense realism. The concept ‘God’, in this remark, is compared to the concept ‘object’ which is employed in the assertion of the realist (‘there are physical objects’) in order to refute the sceptic. Yet, the step from idealism to realism is not based on knowing, in the sense of being certain. Scepticism is irrefutable. It is normally held that scepticism and theism are opposed. But here theism benefits from the irresistibility of scepticism. It reminds us of the responsibility of the individual in her belief formation.

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