
THE ISSUE OF PERIODIZATION IN WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Marián Ambrozy^{*1} Roman Králik² and Jordan Poyner³

¹College of International Business ISM Slovakia, Department of Social Sciences,
Duchnovičovo námestie 1, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia

²Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, Štefánikova 67, Nitra, Slovakia

³Indiana University, Department of English Language and Literature, Ballantine Hall, Rm 442,
1020 E. Kirkwood Ave., Bloomington, Indiana 47405, U.S.A.

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Abstract

A great number of academic papers dealing with Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) philosophy of religion have been published. Analytical philosophers and philosophers of history have focused on this topic since the 1960's. This article, therefore, will not attempt to add to the multitude of such studies. A study which would map out Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion would not evidently constitute an addition to the worldwide or even Central European academic space. Instead, this article will focus on the periodization of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion. It will attempt to answer the question: to what extent do the periods that will be dealt with throughout the course of this article correlate to the general periodization of Wittgenstein's philosophy. As Schilbrack notes, Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion also bears a connection to his philosophy of mathematics. This article will also try to show that in these changes from the 'Tractatus' to the 'Philosophical Investigations' in the latter, Wittgenstein ultimately shows a commitment to a philosophical value of openness and willingness to transform one's mind by the discovery of what is given.

Keywords: philosophy, stages, nonsensical, belief, Christianity

1. The early Wittgenstein on religion

The undeniable first phase of Wittgenstein's philosophy is his writing and publishing of the *Tractatus*. We will not dwell on the notoriously known propositions of this work; instead, we will concentrate on the claims made in relation to his philosophy of religion. Wittgenstein's postulations, in his treatise dealing with religion, very closely correlate to the propositions found in the *Tractatus*. Even though, in this particular work, Wittgenstein does not pay much attention to the Philosophy of religion, the analysis of his theorems – coupled with the notes from his journals as well as his bibliography – is sufficient for a coherent picture of his philosophy of religion to emerge.

*E-mail: ambrozy.marian@gmail.com

“In certain philosophical streams of thought of the 20th century, an inclination towards the claim that religion cannot produce substantiated cognitive claims can be found.” [1] That which can be stated can be stated in a clear manner, but some things are left unsaid because it is senseless to speak of them. However, this does not necessarily mean that such things do not exist, nor that there is any reason to ignore them – “As it was pointed out by Pasquale Frascolla, there are two kinds of subjects mentioned in the *Tractatus*: the metaphysical subject – the limit of the world – and the empirical subject“ [2]. First of all, religious questions do not belong among scientific ones, as has been promoted ever since the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, which bore with it “an uncritical faith in the objectivity of human reason - in the capacity of reason (a metaphysical, transpersonal category) to explain the world and to teach the human race how to live in it” [3]. Wittgenstein counters: “We feel that even if all possible scientific questions are answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all” [4].

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein accepts that statements can be divided into several categories. The first category of statements are meaningful ones, which constitute the statements made by the Natural sciences: “These statements are sentences that share a common logical form with the world that also makes them an integral part of the world, and as such, they state something either true or false about the world” [5]. The second kind of statements are senseless statements, mainly tautologies and contradictions – the statements inherent to Mathematics and Logic. They are generally true or false, but they do not touch upon the world in any way: “In this case, such statements embody a legitimate and logically coherent chain of signifiers, even though the resultant statement is without its informatory value“ [6]. The third group of statements are, according to Wittgenstein, nonsensical ones. It is not possible to subject these to empirical verification. They either constitute grammatically discomposed statements, or they contain a term whose semantic meaning is not verifiable or falsifiable because it transcends the bounds of language. The second case – when the semantic meaning cannot be grasped – integrates a specific type of situation. If statements attempt to transcend the bounds of language, it means that they cannot be verbally communicated, only shown: “What can be said, according to Wittgenstein, can be said in a transparent manner and which shows us what cannot be said” [7, p. 10]. Wittgenstein attributes ethical and religious statements to such statements. He offers an example: “They are of the same kind as the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful” [4, p. 39] As it is well known, Wittgenstein postulated that statements be analysed in an intuitive manner because otherwise problems occur when formulating definitive criteria (in the sense Wittgenstein invoked in the *Tractatus*) for the analysis of statements [6].

“What is especially interesting for the further examination of Wittgenstein’s opinions concerning ethics is the claim made by McGuiness that Wittgenstein puts the mystical experience on the same level as ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics.” [8, p. 175] Wittgenstein’s thoughts on ethics, present towards

the end of the *Tractatus*, may be used when trying to ascertain his opinions on religion. The Austrian philosopher allocates values outside of the world: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world" [4, p. 87]. He assumes ethics (as well as aesthetics) to be of a transcendental character. Values do not belong in the world, and that which would appear as a value – during the description of the empirical state of things – cannot be so. "Wittgenstein does not use the word 'God' very often, but he uses it in a consistent way." [9, p. 316] Wittgenstein explicitly addresses God only once in the *Tractatus* when he claims: "God does not reveal himself in the world" [4, p. 89].

The aforementioned statements concerning religion were thus seen by Wittgenstein as senseless – nothing can be said about them. In spite of that, in his *Notebooks*, he formulates statements such as: "The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God" and "What do I know about God and the purpose of life? I know that this world exists" [10]. His claims can be expanded by another postulation: "In this sense God would simply be fate, or, what is the same thing: The world - which is independent of our will" [10]. "His private opinions presented in written form (which in stricto sensu should constitute senseless statements) also correspond to the bibliographical realia. It is known that in the trenches of World War I Wittgenstein often read Tolstoy's interpretation of the Gospel [11]. He had lived the life of a soldier who had faced religion head on. He was not only a believer, but a Christian declaimer that recommended Tolstoy's book to those who had fallen into despair." [12]

In his zeal to serve as an example for others, Wittgenstein voluntarily took on the most dangerous combat missions and he became a war hero. His combat missions paradoxically strengthened his religious belief. He had lived the unwritten part of his *Tractatus* – the life of a volunteer who, in his effort to defend his country, managed to mobilize all of his strength and courage, in order to carry out the mission at hand to the best of his abilities. His later donation of his estate and his volunteer work as a gardener and teacher are also reflections of that which he had written in the *Tractatus* about religion. His telling of the unfinished part of the *Tractatus* – on the subject of religion – through his actions was indeed exemplary. He never spoke of it: "his students did not recall him mentioning the Gospel during his teachings" [13].

2. Middle Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's concept of religion can truly be regarded as significant and consistent with his general notions. He advocated a similar position in his *Lecture on Ethics*. This text, as Ondřej Beran aptly notes, was an afterthought to the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein does not add anything new to the understanding of ethics and religion, he merely explains these issues from a different perspective: "Wittgenstein makes yet another attempt [...] to show that his position is radically different from the one maintained by the anti-metaphysical positivists." [14, p. 438] That he had managed to do so does not change the fact that the text is ideologically similar to the *Tractatus*. He offers a well-known example

according to which a human being, familiar with all the motions and all of the internal states of the Universe, could not possibly know a single ethical statement because values are of a transcendental nature. He mentions two experiences, the first of which is based on wonder. Wittgenstein states: "I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'." [15, p. 8] In a similar manner, he mentions an experience during which he has a feeling of absolute safety. It is a mystical experience which is typologically very close to a religious mystical experience. In the aforementioned lecture, he once again emphasizes his conviction that such experience is senseless to verbalize; he states that the claim – I wonder at the existence of the world – is as senseless to express as is the claim that God is the creator of the Universe.

A certain development of his notions can be seen in connection to his discussions with the members of the Vienna Circle. It is here where his general opinions about verification, physicalism, logical analysis, and his concept of language begin to further develop. In the discussions which he held with Waismann, Schlick, and Carnap, he gradually began to assume different ideological positions than those found in the *Tractatus*.

In his conversations with Schlick and Waismann, Wittgenstein dwelled on religious argumentation. He thought that what is good is thus because God wills it. Here, it seems, Wittgenstein got into a dispute with Schlick, because he relinquished his original stance on the inability to verbally express the nature of religion and ethics. The justification of religious morality and ethics resides within God. The claim that *what is good is what God wills* is a justification, not something mystical or inexpressible [16]. Here we are confronted with the limits of language and (as Wittgenstein could very well imagine) religion without verbal expression.

The purpose of religion lies in practicing it: "For it is true of expectation, belief, hope, etc., that each of these words is used not for a specific process, but for different though mutually related processes. In all these cases we can speak in fact of articulated and unarticulated process (for action)." [17] Religion is open to verbal expression, however, not in the sense of theological theories, but in the sense of its practice. Which is why it is no longer necessary to stay silent when it comes to religion. There is a kind of power that either punishes or rewards, which resides behind duty – otherwise nothing would make sense. Towards the end of his discussions, Wittgenstein aptly paraphrases Schopenhauer, whose influence is significant especially in Wittgenstein's earlier philosophy [18].

The *Tractatus* markedly differs from earlier Wittgenstein when it comes to his religious convictions. In connection with this, it should be stated that in the aforementioned discussions Wittgenstein even shows sympathy towards the propositions put forward by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, as well as *What Is Metaphysics?* He shows understanding for those problems expressed by

Heidegger that are related to the limits of language. The anxiety deriving from nothingness, and his quest to find the purpose of being, correlates with Wittgenstein's amazement and wonder arising from pure existence (compare with [19-21]).

In 1937, Wittgenstein mentioned that religion should be linguistically tended in such a way that each level of religiousness would possess expressions which would be senseless on another level. In this way the meaning of expressions that have a purpose in one level of religious consciousness would not get entangled with the communication of other levels of religiousness. Otherwise they would not only lack meaning, but they could also be misunderstood: "Thus, we can understand the word God if, following Wittgenstein's indications, we start to use it inside a specific linguistic [community], where the practice gives sense to the word, in prayer or confession" [22, p. 21].

3. Late Wittgenstein

Let us pay attention, for a while, to the arguments on the subject of religion presented by later Wittgenstein. The later philosophy of Wittgenstein could be summarized by the following: "Wittgensteinian philosophy claims to leave everything as it is" [23, p. 106]. It seems that Wittgenstein's attitude towards religion had subsequently changed in several aspects: "The later Wittgenstein foreshadowed an understanding of theology as grammar" [24]. During the beginning of what could be called his later philosophical period (1938), he gave his *Lectures on Religious Belief*. While reading them, it becomes obvious that Wittgenstein shifted to different topics than those recorded in the writings from his middle period. Questions of the certainty of belief, its roots, and the last judgement dominate in this later period. The three pivotal issues in the *Lectures* could be outlined as "the nature of religious belief, the incommensurability of religious and nonreligious belief and the unreasonableness of religious belief" [25].

The first of these three topics Wittgenstein addresses in the initial paragraphs of the *Lectures*. He realized that even Christian belief is made up of its constituents. Belief itself is not a certainty, Wittgenstein emphasizes. To believe in different things, even when it comes to the predefined position of believers, does not mean to have differences only in the explanations of the meaning of individual religious terms. "Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly I am not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near to agreement. However, it isn't a question of our being anywhere near to agreement with Wittgenstein, but rather we are on an entirely different plane. Wittgenstein replies to his imaginary interlocutor, "The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning" [26]. The nature of religious belief is by no means a certainty, it is belief.

Even Wittgenstein writes about his doubts, about various levels of religious consciousness. He acknowledges the differences which exist among different beliefs, and he knows that various religious convictions do not share a common belief in the last judgement. There is no content that would be typical for belief. “According to Wittgenstein, the notion that one religion can be truer than another, or that science refutes and surpasses magic and religion, is based on the wrongful understanding of magic and religion.” [27, p. 86] One of the typical signs of religious belief is its incommensurability with nonreligious belief (nota bene, the incommensurability of religious systems is addressed in a new book by Rudolf Dupkala [28]).

According to Wittgenstein, belief is not based on proof: “[the religious person] will probably say he has proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief.” [28, p. 54] True religious belief cannot be synonymous with superstition, it has to be differentiated from it. Religion is also not based on proving miracles. Wittgenstein maintains a fideistic position, similar to that maintained by Kierkegaard. Wittgenstein “disapproves those who see religious belief as hypothetical, reasonable, or dependent on empirical evidence” [29, p. 280].

Religious and nonreligious ideological convictions are different from each other: “And then I give an explanation: ‘I don’t believe in ...’, but then the religious person never believes what I describe.” [26, p. 55] The principles of convictions are radically ulterior, and, in a given context, even the same terms – used in the speech of a believer and a nonbeliever – can mean something entirely different because, as Martin [25] notes, the use of the term is different. The language employed by a believer and a nonbeliever are incommensurable. However, Wittgenstein emphasizes that this discrepancy has nothing to do with the disagreements present in other areas of life [30]. In some hypothetical and specific situations, a sceptic and a believer may understand each other, Wittgenstein says. A religious person, however, takes into account belief that is not based on evidence.

In his *Lectures*, Wittgenstein also deals with the relationship between belief, reason, and meaning. He sees religious proofs as fragile. In the last part, he entertains the question of the adequacy of our belief. He sees the evidence of belief as irrational because it is not subject to rational argumentation. Some interpreters of Wittgenstein claim that here he alludes to the Letter to the Corinthians, wherein Paul of Tarsus states: to some people, the word of the cross is foolishness. He seems to be saying that to some people, Christianity is absurd. Nota bene, Wittgenstein’s notes – wherein he alludes to the Bible – have been, with regard to the relative eccentricity of these remarks, rarely explored [31].

Religious claims to proof have very little support. Some religious convictions are unproven and, in light of evidence, even seem improbable. Wittgenstein views evidence as simply insufficient for belief. Thus he admired Kierkegaard, who said that people believe in Christianity despite the absurdity of its doctrines [32, 33]. The influence of Kierkegaard on Wittgenstein’s philosophy is, for example, addressed by Boix [34]. On the other hand,

Wittgenstein was far from being a religious fundamentalist or fanatic: "That Wittgenstein is a stumbling block to philosophical theists and atheists alike is itself a testimony to the originality of his way of approaching such traditional questions in the Philosophy of religion as whether it is rational to believe in God" [35].

Several claims regarding religion and belief can be also found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In this book Wittgenstein talks about religion only sporadically. He considers prayer to be an example of a language game: "Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying" [36]. In the *Investigations* he discusses various forms of life, and this is what religion is to him: a form of life, as opposed to a form of knowing. For Wittgenstein, religion expresses a certain historical and metaphysical truth that is outside the capabilities of an ordinary human spirit [37, 38]. He repeats the question of the certainty of belief. He ponders the historicity of Moses. He perceives the various possibilities of the use of the term 'Moses'. It could be the child saved by the Egyptian princess of the Nile, the leader of the Israelites, the man named Moses who lived at a certain time in a certain place, etc. He asks what needs to be falsified in order for us to not believe in the existence of the man who is bound by everything that is written in the Holy Scripture. He arrives at the conclusion that such a measure does not exist. Wittgenstein concludes that the basis for defending the authenticity of Moses in a biblical sense lies in one's own decision, as opposed to a verification in biblical history: "Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa?" [36, p. 37] The basis is belief alone – here Wittgenstein maintains his fideistic position.

People form other religious positions for the fundament of belief. In the second part of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks how the use of the expression 'believe' came into existence: "So it looks as if the assertion 'I believe' were not the assertion of what is supposed in the hypothesis 'I believe!'" [36, p. 190]. Wittgenstein understands the expression 'I believe' as one's use of something, of which one claims that it is as it is. Even though he claims that it is possible not to believe one's own senses, the same is not possible when it comes to religious belief.

Wittgenstein's last work (called *On Certainty*) is quite sparse on the topic of religion. There are also different propositions connected to religious belief in the aforementioned work. In it, Wittgenstein maintains the position that certainty is more about action than knowledge. If we were to question every proposition in its entirety, we would always have to ask: "how do you know it is so?" We would arrive in the realm of complete scepticism. Which is why there exist certain statements that cannot be contested: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt" [39]. In the attempt to bypass complete scepticism, a human being chooses facts that he or she views as the most fundamental, and does not contest them. As the most fundamental, those facts thus present themselves as self-evident.

It is on this basis that we can perceive the context of belief in Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion towards the end of the philosopher's life. The dying Wittgenstein effectively did not change the opinions of religion which he held in his later period. The truths of religious belief are those that we believe and for which we do not need any proof. In Wittgenstein's understanding, belief is not subject to proof, but rather to one's decision.

4. Conclusions

So how could we answer the questions posed at the beginning of this article? The general periodization of Wittgenstein's philosophy is not, as modern interpreters suggest [16, 40, 41], binary. Though in accordance with the majority of Wittgenstein's interpreters in recognizing that there are notable elements (e.g. phenomenological themes), this paper maintains the position that it is possible to divide Wittgenstein's philosophy into its earlier, middle, and later periods.

The original position of the *Tractatus* is clear. Wittgenstein sees religion as something that cannot be verbally expressed and is transcendent, belonging to mysticism: "Even in the *Tractatus* did he find an inexplicable experience in connection with the world as a whole, which is designated from the outside (from the point of view of nowhere) as opposed to the effective perspective of the real and absolute states of things" [42, p. 1051]. In this sense, this article refutes the absurd interpretation of the so-called 'New Wittgensteinians' who consider the whole *Tractatus* to be self-destructive [43]. Although from a different point of view, this interpretation is also refuted by Došek [44].

The middle period of his philosophy of religion greatly differs from that of the *Tractatus* and excludes the *Lecture on Ethics*. Wittgenstein clearly abandons his convictions about the transcendental nature of religion. He also moves the possibility of religious accounts to a new level. The value of a religiously meaningful act is no longer positioned within a human being (as it was in the *Tractatus*), rather it has to be guaranteed by some higher power. The distinctions between this and the religious position of later Wittgenstein are noticeable here.

The last period of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion shows clear signs of consistency. These topics are related to defining the nature of religious belief, the justification of belief, the rationality behind belief, and the incommensurability of religious and nonreligious belief. Wittgenstein also assumes a fideistic position on the subject of the evidence of belief, which he perceives as being exceedingly fragile. This is reminiscent of some medieval mystics' and Protestant reformers' positions, including Luther's claim that only God "evokes faith and a good conscience in the inner man" [45, p. 185], that is, beyond the power of reasonable arguments. Some of his convictions are also consistent with those of Kierkegaard [46-49]. He considers religion to be a form of life and prayer to be a language game: "A truly Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion can only be a personal process, and there can be no part in it for generalized hypotheses or conclusions about religion in general" [50, p. 161].

Wittgenstein views belief as a matter of decision, which he supports in *Philosophical Investigations*, as well as in *On Certainty* – where he claims that some ideological propositions cannot be subjected to relativization. These topics and opinions can be understood as significantly different than those which Wittgenstein presented in the middle period of his philosophy. While in his middle period, religion and its values have God as their explanation. In Wittgenstein's later period (in *On Certainty*), however, as Beran [16, p. 105] notes, he talks about the human choice not to contest certain statements. In this sense, it becomes possible to address the third stage of his philosophy of religion.

This article demonstrates a coherent connection between the individual periods of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the sense of its triadistic division into earlier, middle, and later periods. The discrepancy present in his opinions native to the first period, presented in his *Lecture on Ethics*, resides in the fact that here Wittgenstein basically expands on the notions he advanced in the *Tractatus*. Also, as Burley [51] shows, there are no cardinal contradictions among the individual periods of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion. In this sense, there is full concordance between the evolution of Wittgenstein's general opinions and their periodization, and the individual stages of his philosophy of religion.

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