

Luigi Perissinotto, Vicente Sanf  lix (Eds.)
Doubt, Ethics and Religion
Wittgenstein and the Counter-Enlightenment

APORIA

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Luigi Perissinotto, Vicente Sanf  lix (Eds.)

Doubt, Ethics and Religion

Wittgenstein and the Counter-Enlightenment



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Doubt, Ethics and Religion: An Introduction

LUIGI PERISSINOTTO AND VICENTE SANFÉLIX VIDARTE

It will soon be the sixtieth anniversary of Wittgenstein's death in 1951. Since then there have been substantial changes in the way in which we read and understand the work of the Austrian philosopher. Wittgenstein is no longer regarded just as an analytic philosopher, or as a logical atomist and natural interlocutor of Frege and Russell or even as the pioneer of a new style of ordinary language philosophy; he has become a classic in the history of philosophy in his own right. In spite of his self-doubts on this issue, Wittgenstein was an extremely original thinker, highly personal in his philosophical and writing styles. Examining his work in relation to some of the great thinkers of the western philosophical tradition is both natural and necessary, not only because this serves to shed light on Wittgenstein's texts, but also because it enables us better to understand the (quite pessimistic) diagnosis he makes of the western civilisation.

Aware of the recent shifts in Wittgensteinian scholarship, over five years ago a group of European and Latin American specialists set up a research project with the aim of contributing to the now far more wide-ranging hermeneutical debate on the Viennese philosopher¹. Our work has crystallised in a series of collective publications² – publications which are the product of a series of regular seminars in which we discussed the work of members of the project and of other scholars specifically invited for the occasion, and of a series of annual conferences that focused on different aspects of Wittgensteinian philosophy.

Taking advantage of the generous offer made to us by Jesús Padilla Gálvez and Alejandro Tomasini Bassols, editors of the *Aporía* collection within the publisher Ontos Verlag, we are delighted to present a selection

¹ Our team has enjoyed and continues to enjoy the generous funding that the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación has granted the research project FFI2008-00866/FISO: "Cultura y religión: Wittgenstein y la contra-ilustración".

² N. Sánchez Durá (Ed.), *Cultura contra civilización*; C. Moya Espí (Ed.), *Sentido y sinsentido* and A. J. Perona (Ed.), *Wittgenstein y la tradición clásica*, all of which were published by the Valencian publishing house Pre-textos in 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively.

of the papers that emerged in connection with our most recent conference³ This selection of texts aims to situate Wittgenstein's work within some of the most important currents of modern Western philosophy. The piece by Jean Pierre Cometti compares the Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of religion and to ethics with that of other key authors belonging to the pragmatist tradition. The pieces by Vicente Sanf  lix and Joaqu  n Jare  o pursue that comparison further by contrasting Wittgenstein's work with those of other classics of philosophy and of Western culture, notably David Hume. The pieces by Juli  n Marrades and Chon Tejedor continue this task by focusing on the relation between Wittgenstein's work and that of Schopenhauer. The texts by Joan B. Llinares and Isabel Cabrera consider the relations between Tolstoy's work and Wittgenstein's thinking. Finally, the piece by Luigi Perissinotto draws a contrast between Wittgenstein's concepts of doubt and certainty and those belonging to the Enlightenment tradition. If this book serves to further the debate about Wittgenstein's thinking, we will judge our aim to have been more than fulfilled.

³ IV encuentro internacional cultura y civilizaci  n. Wittgenstein: duda, religi  n y   tica. This was held at the Facultad de Filosof  a y CC.EE. at the Universidad de Valencia on the 27th and 28th of May 2010.

Is Wittgenstein a Religious Thinker?

JEAN-PIERRE COMETTI

*The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after.*¹

R.W. Emerson

It might seem unusual to associate Wittgenstein with religiousness. However, many of Wittgenstein's thoughts, like those of Kierkegaard, Pascal, Augustine or Tolstoi, have been conditioned by his interrogations about God and faith, to such an extent that one may legitimately wonder whether this is somehow relevant to our understanding of his philosophy. Such will be my perspective in the next few pages, but I will also examine how this aspect of Wittgenstein's writings may originally contribute to our thoughts on religious belief -in particular because Wittgenstein's reflections in this domain echo the positions such pragmatist philosophers as Peirce and James have sometimes adopted in relation with their own religious creeds.

1. Wittgenstein and Religious Belief

Wittgenstein's major texts about religious belief have been collected in *Lessons on Religious Belief*, a volume Cyrill Barrett edited in 1938 from notes taken by Y. Smithies, R. Rhees and J. Taylor. But there exist other texts about these questions, among which more personal notes one may find in interviews and in his notebooks². I will not examine them all here for they have been abundantly commented upon, neither will I consider all of their aspects. I will focus my attention on a small number of questions that will enable me to see in a common light what I purport to be Wittgenstein's position, on the one hand, and the position of the founders of Pragmatism, on the other hand.

From the beginning, it appears that Wittgenstein and James have had in common the fact that they both wrote about religion, as philosophers or psychologists are apt to do, and also lived through a personal religious

¹ Emerson, 1926, 200.

² Cf. Wittgenstein, 1991 and 1997. On this subject, see also Cometti, 1998.

experience which is not irrelevant when one tries to understand their writings on the subject. This is why one may not assert that Wittgenstein was “religionless”, as this was done in the preface to a paperback edition of *the Lessons on Religious Belief*. Wittgenstein’s family had given up Judaism in favor of Protestantism but he never worshipped, in the common sense of the word, neither as a Protestant, nor as a Jew -and he always had mixed feelings about Catholicism. However it now seems clear that the religious question has always been in his mind, as his diaries testify³. The *Vermischte Bemerkungen* is the other place where Wittgenstein adopts a more personal stance and where he expresses “religious thoughts” as well as thoughts about religion.

However amazing this may seem too many, this will not surprise the reader who is familiar with Wittgenstein’s ideas about culture, science and philosophy, for Wittgenstein considered these questions as *personal* problems and nothing was to be excluded from the range of such *personal* problems.

Naturally, to say that problems were personal does not mean that they were existential, neither does it mean that they had some psychological meaning. In his mind, philosophical problems originated in *linguistic* misunderstandings, or at least in our inappropriate *usages* of language. But beyond that, questions of language are related to forms of life. Furthermore, such problems, which are food for high-flown philosophical debates, are not directly accessible to all: they are the objects of specific compulsions which, as Wittgenstein suggests, cannot therefore be dealt with from an exclusively “conceptual” viewpoint. “Authorized” French commentators tend to weaken the thrust of Wittgenstein’s thought by insisting that the difference between he and other philosophers resides in his conception of philosophy as a form of conceptual analysis whose major key and tool is his concept of “grammar”. This mistake comes in handy to those who wish to use Wittgenstein much as they use other philosophers recognized as such by the community of philosophy professors.

This should remind us of Wittgenstein’s energetic rejection of the very idea that his thought could one day become a doctrine and that other people might one day call themselves “Wittgensteinians”. Simultaneously,

³The notebooks published in *Denkbewegungen* are very noteworthy in this respect. The beauty and powerfulness of many texts justify the comparison with Pascal and Kierkegaard. About these authors, see Drury’s notes in Rhees, 1981.

this should help us better grasp the link that existed between his religious and philosophical interests.

As I suggested, the very fact that philosophical problems do not exist of themselves and yet are forcefully imposed upon us through some specific compulsions justifies the parallels between philosophy and psychoanalysis occasionally made by Wittgenstein. This is precisely what excludes the very idea of a “conceptual analysis”, but also what explains two major aspects of the Wittgensteinian approach, or of the meaning he ascribed to it: firstly, the fact that to him dealing with philosophical problems required an exertion of the *will*; secondly, the fact that philosophy should be considered as *work on oneself*.⁴

These two ideas are intimately related. Philosophically, as anyone will agree, to work on oneself means to give oneself the intellectual means to tackle the questions one wishes to study. But this also means to give oneself the required mental means, i.e., to overcome and to habituate one’s mind to overcome the pulsions and obstacles that limit our vision and in which most of our mistakes originate. Wittgenstein has not dwelt much upon this point, but his conception seems to have been that images spring from our language’s grammar which lead us astray. However, we are led by strong compulsions toward some of these images rather than others. Language, which permanently permeates thought though it be but its tool, exerts a specific suggestive force to which our usages -the language games- add their own strength related to our actions and our forms of life. This is the reason why -although the case of science is different- the resulting problems call for a type of clarification which requires an exertion of the will beyond the sole intellectual means at hand. In this sense, there is in the practice of philosophy something in the order of exercise, for no outcome will result without the adequate will. Somehow, to think philosophically is to act.

But then, one may raise the following question: “What exactly does philosophical thought act upon?”. Furthermore, if this be the case, how is it related to religious questions and belief? Some of Wittgenstein’s notes in his notebooks then become to make sense, although this is open to discussion. To my mind, these notes are relevant for one who wishes to evaluate Wittgenstein’s philosophy as regards religious matters and others. They very clearly show that he personally was unable to separate his “work” -as he said- from his religious and moral interests. He

⁴ Cf. Wittgenstein, 1980: “Philosophy like architecture is first and before all a work on oneself.”

systematically relates his work -his successes and failures- with what we may describe as his mental or psychological state defined according to what he called his “decency”. To him everything seemed as if his capacity to work successfully in the philosophical field necessitated conditions of *will* and *decency* -and only God could answer his calls for such potential strength.

I believe it would be a mistake to once more push aside this strange combination as a mere uninteresting mark of strictly personal “eccentricity”. However tempted we could be to dissociate Wittgenstein’s general thoughts about religion one finds in other texts, from the generally more personal ones he expresses in his notebooks, I believe we should make the effort to explore their possible interrelation. As we shall see, this is precisely what James very originally calls for. But how is this to be done?

There is at least one way of understanding why these two aspects of Wittgenstein’s thoughts about religion should not be set apart. We know the *Lessons on Religious Belief* establish a very fundamental relation between what specifically belongs to religious belief and what manifests itself in a form of life. However apparently banal, the assertion of such a relationship does not only mean that every community has its beliefs or that the key to such beliefs is to be found in the culture or the society, or even in the illusions they breed. Certainly, such an anthropological point of view is not absent from Wittgenstein’s thought, as his remarks on Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*⁵ clearly indicate, but the link he establishes between the religion and the form of life goes deeper than that. In particular, what he means is that questions of religion must not be dealt with like *doctrines* or systems of *ideas* which need to be discussed from a *theoretical*, or even from a strictly *intellectualist* point of view. On the contrary, one must gauge how they are rooted in common and *shared* practices. Simultaneously, this link indicates that religion -or religious practices- is not just the reflection of a mistaken awareness of reality -an “illusion” or an “opium”. Intellectualist sophistry works at both ends. One may not discuss religion from a scientific viewpoint and a religious belief is not the expression of a theoretical view gone awry.

These are well-known tenets and we know what types of approaches of religious belief they aim to contradict. However, how may they be related to the type of experience Wittgenstein describes in his notebooks? Basically, I believe the relation Wittgenstein posits between religion and

⁵ Wittgenstein, 1993.

forms of life has two major consequences. Firstly, the engagement belief implies is a both religious and ethical engagement in a form of life which manifests itself in a specific language and experience and which conditions “will” -in the sense suggested above. This does not mean that our intellectual capacities and choices are *necessarily* determined by our religious beliefs, although they *may* be, but this does mean that our religious experience, and perhaps especially its ethical components, are able to communicate with our capacity to deal with philosophical problems, at least as long as we admit that they are not scientific problems but problems which essentially require that our linguistic usages and the nature of their links with forms or modes of life be clarified.

But such is not the most important consequence. Religious belief is unwavering, as both the *Lessons* and the *Notebooks* demonstrate. It escapes both scientific and historical evaluation, but it also belongs to a specific mode of certainty which, in a way cannot be questioned. One may be tempted to say that this is precisely the most questionable aspect of Wittgenstein’s approach. In order to avoid all mistakes, it is necessary, however, to be more precise. On the one hand, the certainty we are dealing with is subjective -which may be surprising but is explained by reasons we are familiar with and which I will leave aside⁶- and it may consequently lead to other, competing certainties. But on the other hand, this certainty is precisely not only a certainty of thought, an *interior* or *intimate* certainty, so to speak. It cannot be set apart from a vital engagement, it point towards a form of life and its consequences in this context give it worth and truth. In other words, the link between belief and form of life unexpectedly confirms the pragmatic principle and seems to support William James’s conclusion to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*⁷. Naturally, one should lead us to ask what Wittgenstein’s thought shares with James’s analysis of religious belief.

2. Pragmatism and Religion

In the past few years, Hilary Putnam has become interested in James’s and Wittgenstein’s thoughts, with a special interest for their ethical and religious dimensions. It is not immediately clear how pragmatism -as James suggests it- seems to be the best attitude available as regards religious belief. One could try and proceed through elimination, as I have

⁶ Think of course of the question of private language.

⁷ James, 1985.

partially done above. One may also try to understand this directly through a quick review of Peirce's and James's views.⁸

It is well known that Peirce was a deeply religious man, and Christopher Hookway has insisted on this point and on how much his metaphysical conceptions derived from this state of fact. Peirce's most original text on this subject is "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God"⁹. Peirce's presents belief in God as one of the outcomes of what he calls "musement", thus allowing it to escape all practical considerations - and also theoretical, in a sense- since it has nothing to do with scientific aims or the quest for truth.

In a way, there is something like a hypothesis in Peirce's argumentation, for the suggestion it makes is abduction-based¹⁰. It cannot be tested like the hypotheses of science, but is there really no possible testing of such a hypothesis? Strangely enough this problem may be solved by using a principle which is explicitly presented as pragmatist. As Peirce indicates in another passage of the *Collected Papers*,

"If a pragmatist is asked what he means by the word "God", he can only say that just as long as acquaintance with a man of great character may deeply influence one's whole manner of conduct [...] so if contemplation and study of the physical-psychical universe can imbue a man with principles of conduct analogous to the influence of a great man's works or conversation, then that analogue of a mind - for it is impossible to say that any human attribute is literally applicable- is what he means by "God" "¹¹.

These remarks raise many questions I will not dwell upon here. However, I will single out one of their aspects which is apt to cast some light on a possible pragmatist conception of religious belief Peirce shares with James, and which is analogous with a major dimension of Wittgenstein's own analyses.

Obviously, in this text, Peirce seems to perceive as essential a relationship between belief in God and the believer's life. He seems to think that what justifies belief has nothing to do with the kinds of proofs theologians generally seek, nor with what their rationalist adversaries

⁸ On this several points, see H. Putnam, 1992, 1994, and my own remarks in Cometti, 2001.

⁹ Peirce, 1980, 452-485. See also Hookway, 1985, 276-281

¹⁰ Cf. Peirce, 1980, § 2 "The Hypothesis of God". As Hookway, 1985, 278 reminds us, pragmatism is to be an inquiry «which produces, not merely scientific belief, which is always provisional, but also a living, practical belief».

¹¹ Peirce, 1980, 502, in Hookway, 1985, 278.

criticize. Peirce's pragmatism, as well as that of James and Wittgenstein, changes the issues of the debate and keeps religious belief safe from the main models of justification and criticism it is usually submitted to. More or less, one may say that this changing of the issue is pragmatist because it is all about what *makes the difference*, whereas such debates are usually mired in confusion and miss the essential. However, as James's own position testifies, the pragmatist principle is not without encountering its own obstacles.

I will concentrate on two views developed in *The Forms of Religious Experience* and in *The Will to Believe*¹². Under one aspect at least, James's and Peirce's viewpoints converge, i.e., the question of belief defines a category of problems whose meaning must be evaluated in the light of choices that concern the believer's *life* and engage his present and future conduct. The conceptions developed in *The Will to Believe* are very clear in this respect. A belief's legitimacy depends on choices that depend on nothing else, it is based on a type of certainty that has nothing to do with the guarantees we seek when dealing with theoretical or practical hypotheses. This is the reason why it was meaningless for James -as well as for Peirce and Wittgenstein- to consider religion as a "vestige" of bygone ages¹³. James's singular viewpoint gives sentiments -and even passion- a role that has contributed to cloud its originality and interest. But inasmuch as religion absolutely cannot be evaluated in the light of our knowledge of the world or of our sole reasoning, theories play but a "secondary role" in it.

"At this purely subjective rating, therefore, Religion must be considered vindicated in a certain way from the attacks of her critics. It would seem that she cannot be a mere anachronism and survival, but must exert a permanent function, whether she be with or without intellectual content, and whether, if she have any, it be true or false".¹⁴

In *The Forms of Religious Experience*, James's psychological vantage point leads him to introduce the idea of a finite god whose manifestations he purports to discover in the variety of well-known and identified forms of experience. Two things, however, are likely to be questioned by the reader at this point.

Indeed, as Peirce suggests -at least in the passages I have chosen to comment upon- pragmatism, more than any other philosophy, may help us

¹² James (1985) and (1987)

¹³ Cf. James, 1985.

¹⁴ James, 1985, 507.

to understand that religious belief finds its meaning and legitimacy, and even its “truth”, in the effects it has on the believer’s conduct in his life. One may wonder, however, if this shields religious belief from *doubt*, and if the related choices exclusively concern the believer. In other words, if we translate the question in the terms of the Wittgensteinian problematic of the rule: Is it possible to believe *alone*? Finally, if we remember what James tried to demonstrate in *The Will to Believe*, isn’t religious belief a particular case of wishful thinking?¹⁵

I will get back to the first two points when I deal with Wittgenstein, for the two related questions concern a point he broadly shares with James. However, the *wishful thinking* criticism concerns James -especially in *The Will to Believe*. Let’s turn the question differently. To what extent may someone who chooses a belief as a response to what James calls a “living choice”, durably and effectively engaging his life in the paths this belief helps him define, claim the very same paths justify the belief that was there origin? Needless to say this question is intimately related to the two first aforementioned points. The part James ascribes to sentiments makes it even more legitimate. Would religion, among other things, be but a way of engaging in wishful thinking?

At first sight, it is difficult to imagine how a pragmatist thinker who espouses James’s views in *The Will to Believe* may avoid the debate on doubt and truth. All the more so as one cannot see clearly how the *difference* this is all about would really *make a difference* since it solely depends on the projection of desires. But at this point several threads must be disentangled.

The original question was about the effects one may expect from a belief and whether these effects may, from a pragmatist point of view, acquire a belief-justifying status. In other words, the question is whether pragmatist principles -the “pragmatist maxim”- is applicable to religious belief, as Peirce and James obviously thought -although their positions did not entirely overlap. We have now reached a point where we are asking whether the relation between the belief and the believer’s life -and the choices this relation supposes- must be held as a case of straightforward and voluntary self-deception. This question has implications regarding the relations between belief -in the pragmatist sense-and conduct. It is also

¹⁵ See; Wernham, 1987. The idea that James is arguing in the defense of something like a willful blindness, we can find it in J. Hick, 1963, quoted by Wernham, 1987, 7. Hick takes the James’ essay as an “encouragement unreserved to wishful realities”.

related to the idea we have of belief and of its conditions. If we restrict our reflections to what James suggests, it appears that he would be adopting an utterly indefensible view if he were saying that a living choice, motivated by the will to believe -in the passionate sense- would suffice to justify belief as long as this choice leads to durable consequences in the believer's conduct that could be ascribed to it. In such a case, to believe would as absurd as to follow a rule alone. However, it seems that on that account James was misunderstood.

Despite the fact that, in his mind, one should always get back to the individual -in this context, the believer facing his belief- James never thought that a belief could lead a life of its own. Certainly, this may sometimes happen, but such cases must be considered as exceptions. I have already mentioned the parallel with rules based on the principle that a belief, defined as a "habit of action", has the status of a rule. I think we can say that when James invokes the relation between belief and the believer's conduct he clearly understands that a belief is nourished by and proves itself in contact with the conditions it faces. The very idea of a "living choice" that he exposes in *The Will to Believe* allows us to understand this. He calls "living choice" the choices our will faces in a context of shared beliefs. Among the conditions of this choice is a context of common possibilities which excludes that anyone may "believe alone", religiously or otherwise. In this respect, James shares Putnam's idea of a "linguistic division of labor"¹⁶. This precisely means that choices in matters of belief cannot really be "private" choices and that they are experienced through the effects they produce -not only on the representation one has of oneself and of one's conduct, but on what may know about it in a given context of shared values and criteria.

But in this case, why is religion reputed "indestructible"? How should one consider the varieties and apparent incompatibilities of beliefs? Wittgenstein's writings address these questions in a manner that should allow us to further our reflection and to show what he and James have in common.

3. James and Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein knew very well James's book on the varieties of religious experience and he valued its teachings as well as its wealth of analyses. It is striking that, dealing with the question of religious "certainty",

¹⁶ Cf. Putnam, 1988. There is also a brief essay from James called «Tigers of India», that is a good illustration of his convictions on this subject.

Wittgenstein and James share the very same idea. In a letter to Rankin where he mentions the lectures that would ultimately lead to the publication of his book, James wrote: “The religion is strictly indestructible”¹⁷. This is exactly what Wittgenstein says in his *Lessons About Religious Belief*. What is the source of this indestructibility? James’s reasons for it are not very different from Wittgenstein’s argument about what he describes as *unshakeable* in religious belief. Furthermore, the reasons given allow us to understand how the apparent incompatibility of beliefs greatly differs from the religious relativism James and Wittgenstein could be suspected to support.

These questions are raised in one of Wittgenstein’s interviews with Drury. Drury, who mentions Wittgenstein’s admiration for James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pointedly quotes the following words which Wittgenstein wrote in *Remarks on Frazer’s The Golden Bough*: “Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*? But – one might say – if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was – or anyone else – whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But none of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory”¹⁸. This reflection is in the same spirit as James’s when he rejected in his letter to Rankin what he called the conceptual interpretation of philosophy and theology. Indeed, for both James and Wittgenstein, to worry about the diversity of religions is a sign of confusion. Naturally, if one considers in each religion what looks like a doctrine, a theory or a worldview, then it goes with religions as with all the rest: plurality leads to incompatibilities which lead us to think, as in the case of cultures, that they cannot all be simultaneously true and that, as Wittgenstein suggested, either Augustine or the Buddhist monk is right. But who ever said that religions should be viewed as theories? Two theories which do not affirm the same thing about the same problem or notion cannot be simultaneously true -although the problem obviously is more complicated than this. But two different modes of life or ways of acting are not contradictory in any way. The question doesn’t even exist, and this is the reason why it is absurd to speak of the incommensurability of cultures. A culture, like a religion, is not a theory, even with we may have reasons to believe that they may be associated to a worldview. One should not focus on the ideas and concepts in a belief, as Frazer did. One must try and understand what a belief means as a *habit of action*, i.e., one

¹⁷ June 16 1901.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, 1993, 119.