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“The Swaying Scaffolding”: A Remark on Belief in God, Imponderable Evidence and Subjective Certainty

Life’s infinite variations are essential to our life. And so too even to the habitual character of life.

–Ludwig Wittgenstein

Abstract

In one of his late notebooks containing remarks on the philosophy of psychology, Wittgenstein states in passing: “If someone can believe in God with complete certainty, why not in Other Minds?” (MS 137, 67a). In this paper, I introduce and explain some of the assumptions and observations behind this remark. In doing so, I give an example of what I describe as an “indirect or derived philosophy-of-religion reading strategy”, which highlights some of Wittgenstein’s very late thoughts on the grammar of religious belief and language. The crucial observation in Wittgenstein’s remark is the existence of a family resemblance between “the foundation” of the religious attitude and belief on the one hand, and the complex “pattern of our experience that is hard to describe”, and which forms the basis of our reactions to and understanding of other persons’ behaviour and psychical states (MS 174, 2) on the other. Thus this paper draws attention, firstly, to the fact that, in his late work, Wittgenstein emphasises that our use of concepts to determine other people’s feelings and states is comparable to certain religious uses of language, and secondly, to some of the familial connections between these uses of language.

1. Then suddenly you realise

It is well known that Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (1969), *Remarks on Colour* (1978) and *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology: The Inner and the Outer* (1992) are essentially selections of comments from eight notebooks (MSS 169, 170, 171, 173, 174, 175, 176 and 177) and a small collection of loose sheets (MS 172) from the years 1949–51. Wittgenstein himself gave these volumes the title “Notebooks No.” followed by a number from 1 through to 7. The remarks in the notebooks are unrevised “first-draft material”, concerned with topics of an epistemological nature and questions about the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of the concept of colour. Wittgenstein shifts between these topics, sometimes abruptly, sometimes by means of smooth transitions. Here and there one finds a scattering of *vermischte Bemerkungen*, including some of his reflections on the philosophy of religion. Wittgenstein's remarks from his final years generally strike us as a determined and complex pursuit, in which “the thought” is “working its way towards the light” (CV 47). The various themes are often linked together in surprising ways. Their trajectory is sometimes oblique, desultory and hesitant, inconclusive and tentative. Sometimes the trail is difficult to follow. In other cases, his starting point is clear and the steps he takes are lucid and illustrative. Some of the remarks reference biographical incidents or personal cultural preferences, others mention who he has in mind when exploring or confronting a certain problem. Viewed as a whole, the writings of this late period document Wittgenstein's agreement with Schopenhauer's dictum that “philosophy is an organism, and that a book on philosophy, with a beginning and end, is a sort of contradiction” (AWL 43). – Working with these remarks from the closing years of Wittgenstein's life, I am often reminded of John King's telling anecdote. King (1984, 69–70) recalls:

I also had a portable gramophone in my digs at Portugal Place; and Wittgenstein came several times to hear some of the few records which I had. [...] I once put on the second, third and fourth movements of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor, op. 131, played, I believe by the Lener String Quartet. He was rapt in his attention and most excited at the end of the playing. He jumped up as if something had suddenly struck him and said,

‘How easy it is to think that you understand what Beethoven is saying’ [...] ‘and then suddenly [...] you realize that you haven’t understood anything at all’.

In the following, I shall take this late, complex and difficult text corpus as a context for my analysis of what I describe as an indirect or derived philosophy-of-religion reading strategy. My focus here is on an incidental remark of relevance to the philosophy of religion that we find in Wittgenstein’s late writings.

2. If someone can believe in God

Typical of many introductions to and treatments of Wittgenstein’s late remarks on the philosophy of religion is a certain tendency to maintain the familiar distinction between the so-called early and late Wittgenstein. At the same time, however, it is often pointed out that Wittgenstein retains certain basic assumptions from the early into the late philosophy. Many studies of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the philosophy of religion begin with an introductory discussion of concepts central to his late praxeological semantics and methodological approach, as found particularly in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). These studies usually discuss familiar concepts such as “use”, “rules”, “technique”, “grammar”, “picture”, “form of life”, “family resemblance”, “perspicuous presentation”, etc. This is then followed by an analysis of the familiar and relevant texts, remarks and other surviving material in which Wittgenstein discusses issues in the philosophy of religion more explicitly. Here I am thinking of *A Lecture on Ethics* (1965), certain passages in *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (1979), *Remarks on Frazer’s “The Golden Bough”* (1967), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (1966), the diaries *Movements of Thought* (1997), and several remarks in *Culture and Value* (1984) and *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (1984). Via the elucidation of these texts we are introduced to Wittgenstein’s central accounts of religious language use and essential grammatical observations and distinctions. But this approach or manner of presentation has a number of drawbacks. Two that stand out are, firstly, an inclination towards harmonisation, and secondly a tendency to overlook certain remarks.

The former is evident in the fact that these presentations tend to view Wittgenstein's explicit remarks on the philosophy of religion against the background of his late philosophy of language as sketched by the authors. The result is a harmonisation of Wittgenstein's varied and explicit descriptions, insofar as they are viewed sequentially in relation to *one and the same* summary of his late philosophy. Thus, for example, we find both the first part of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's "The Golden Bough"* from 1931 and his notes on the notion of predestination from 1948–49 analysed in conjunction with one and the same outline of the assumptions relating to the philosophy of language sketched in *Philosophical Investigations*. Essentially, an analysis that respects the flow of Wittgenstein's thought at any one time is disregarded in favour of a reading that harmonises his thought by setting everything against one and the same background (see e.g. Barrett 1991, Glebe-Møller & Westergaard 1993, and Clack 1999). And this despite the fact that each set of remarks has its own conceptual context that is different from that of the other. Wittgenstein's various descriptions within the philosophy of religion are made to accord with a single focal point. In addition, and precisely because these introductions and analyses tend to be oriented towards the usual, familiar printed editions, they tend to overlook Wittgenstein's many incidental, cursory or impressionistic gestures towards the philosophy of religion that we find scattered among his reflections on the philosophy of language and his grammatical investigations. This one-sided, habitual focus on Wittgenstein's familiar and more explicit treatments of topics to do with the philosophy of religion overlooks the incidental remarks on the same subject that we find scattered throughout his writings. Thus most introductions to Wittgenstein's accounts of religious belief and magic ignore the following remark on magic that occurs in Wittgenstein's late discussion about the experience, or impression, we have when using a word. Wittgenstein emphasises that, in our everyday use of language, we do not perceive words as mere signs with meaning attached to them. We experience or see them as embodiments or manifestations of what they refer to. We experience a name as more than just a label for a person. Wittgenstein writes:

Goethe's signature intimates something Goethian to me. To that extent it is like a face, for I might say the same of his face. It is

like *mirroring*. [...] Or do I ‘*identify*’ the signature with the person in that, e.g. I love to look at the signature of a beloved human being, or I frame the signature of someone I admire and put it on my desk?

Wittgenstein adds: “(Magic that is done with pictures, hair etc.)” (RPP I: §336). In another context, in which he analyses the preconditions necessary for and the characteristics of a vow, he mentions in passing: “A vow could be called a ceremony. (Baptism, even when it is not a Christian sacrament.) And a ceremony has an importance all its own” (RPP II: §581).

Many of these isolated remarks about the philosophy of religion capture tentative grammatical insights of their own. In order to identify and include these occasional allusions to the philosophy of religion in Wittgenstein’s text corpus, we must adopt a different point of departure and different form of presentation than that of the familiar (harmonising) introductions to and analyses of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy of religion. Our point of departure has to be the actual train of philosophical thought itself, *first* in order to identify the individual comments of interest to the philosophy of religion, *second* to elucidate them in light of their immediate “Sitz im Leben” – rather than in relation to a concise outline of Wittgenstein’s so-called late language-philosophical position.

Let us now call the former of these two approaches or forms of presentation – the one that emphasises Wittgenstein’s explicit treatment of topics in the philosophy of religion against a background of his late philosophy in general – the direct, or preliminary, obligatory and central reading strategy. What it does is map Wittgenstein’s main observations about religious language use and crucial grammatical descriptions and distinctions. In contrast to this, we need a different and complementary approach – one that seeks to point out and clarify isolated remarks relating to the philosophy of religion within the context of the particular train of thought in Wittgenstein’s writings – an approach already described above, for which I have suggested the name the indirect or derived philosophy-of-religion reading strategy. The latter serves to map Wittgenstein’s fleeting and peripheral conjectures on religious beliefs and the grammar of religious language use. It is a strategy or approach that complements and has the potential

to add depth to the insights gained by the former direct reading strategy. Both approaches are required, because within Wittgenstein's oeuvre it is essential that we distinguish between the direct and explicit treatment of themes in the philosophy of religion and the indirect or incidental allusions to the same.

In the following I shall give an example of this kind of derived philosophy-of-religion reading strategy, the occasion for which is one of Wittgenstein's incidental remarks of direct relevance to the philosophy of religion. The remark occurs in MS 137, a sustained investigation on the philosophy of psychology from the year 1948, close to the end of Wittgenstein's life. More precisely, the immediate context is an enquiry into how we judge the sincerity of expressions of emotion. An enquiry that also probes the nature of evidence as such and of certainty with regard to the sincerity of what is expressed. Wittgenstein writes:

“But you don't understand!” This is what we say when someone doubts the sincerity of something that we all clearly recognise as sincere.

“You don't understand” – but there's nothing we can prove.

What does it mean to say “You don't understand”? How should I explain it? Wouldn't I have to teach the other, say, an understanding of the arts, and a thousand other things?

Which means, the understanding of that expression is only possible in a particular life; one I am unable to describe – although I recognise deviations from it.

Here Wittgenstein inserts the brief, speculative question: “If someone can believe in God with complete certainty, why not in Other Minds?” He continues: “What I am doing (here) doesn't look like logic, yet it is logic” (MS 137, 67a).

Let me now attempt to unravel some of the grammatical observations behind this brief inserted remark – a remark that prompts us “suddenly to realize that we haven't understood anything at all” – with its juxtaposition of the confidence of religious faith with the certainty that arises in connection with judgements about other people's expressions of emotion. This enquiry will allow an indirect

attempt to clarify the possible content of the remark. – By this means I shall provide an example of a derived philosophy-of-religion reading strategy. My starting point is the notebooks from the years 1949–51 that I mentioned at the outset.

3. A kind of language-game

In his late enquiries into the philosophy of psychology, Wittgenstein is preoccupied in part with the problem of other minds, the question of how we can be confident about our knowledge of the existence or “content” of other people’s minds, and in part the uncertainty that arises in conjunction with a range of psychological concepts. In both contexts Wittgenstein attacks the position we might characterise as “referentialism”, which argues that the primary function of words is to name or refer to discrete and clearly defined objects or activities, including certain inner states or mental processes. Confronting the sceptical assertion that the “outer” is and can only ever be an indirect and unreliable indicator of something “inner” to which only the individual has direct access, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that the evidence provided by the “outer” will always and of necessity be associated with uncertainty. Wittgenstein denies that the “outer” is and can only ever be an obstructive barrier to our knowledge of the “inner”. Wittgenstein concedes that there is some justification for this sceptical assumption. It acknowledges a number of everyday experiences in which we feel uncertainty and confusion about other people’s attitudes and expressions. Wittgenstein cites an autobiographical example: “It is important for our view of things that someone may feel concerning certain people that their inner life will always be a mystery to him. That he will never understand them. (Englishwomen in the eyes of Europeans.)” (CV 74). But these isolated cases do not constitute sufficient evidence for the general claim that the other person’s “inner” is *always* hidden from us, or indeed that it constitutes an inaccessible domain for us. Wittgenstein notes: “But of course it isn’t true that we are never certain about the mental processes in someone else. In countless cases we are” (LWPP II, 94). Thus he declares his opposition on the one hand to the widespread use of the metaphor (the linguistic form), or the conceptual device, of the “inner” and the “outer”, on the

other to the seemingly obvious distinction that that metaphor makes between direct “inner” and indirect “outer” signs. What Wittgenstein is seeking to do here is draw our attention to the many ways in which the “inner” can relate to the “outer”: in other words, the “inner” is linked to the “outer” – to publicly observable forms of expression and action. “The inner is tied up with the outer not only empirically, but also logically. The inner is tied up with the outer logically, and not just empirically” (LWPP II, 63-64).

In several of his late manuscripts, Wittgenstein attempts to sketch an outline of the grammar that applies in cases where one can legitimately speak of a person’s “inner” and “outer”. More specifically, the overall aim is two-fold, insofar as Wittgenstein is striving in part to overcome the simplistic and stereotypical philosophical and psychological applications of the metaphor and in part to identify and map its legitimate uses. What he points out is that the use of the terms “inner” and “outer” misleads us into overlooking the amount of complexity that occurs within the field defined by the two linguistic terms and experience they are intended to represent. Wittgenstein wishes to emphasise that in certain contexts the metaphor has no meaningful use (because in many cases nothing is hidden), while in other cases its use is justified and illuminating (because we very often feel that something is indeed hidden). For example: “We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another” (PI IIxi, 223). In other words, the metaphor of “inner” and “outer” together with those terms themselves do not have a general application. They can be used in a range of situations determined by a range of language games.

This grammatical observation serves as a starting point for an examination of several issues relating to the problem of other minds. One of these is the question of how confident we can be of our inferences concerning the existence of other people’s consciousness and the “content” of their thoughts. Related to this is the question of how we distinguish such knowledge from the “knowledge” of our own consciousness and mental states; or as Wittgenstein puts it in MS 169: “So we always want to say: We know what “pain” means (namely *this*), and so the difficulty only consists in simply not being able to determine

this in someone else with certainty” (LWPP II, 43). With an eye on scepticism, Wittgenstein deploys his grammatical remarks to consolidate the position that there is no unbridgeable gap between the “inner” and the “outer”: the “inner” and the “outer” are interrelated (both logically and experientially). And by extension, he argues that I can have knowledge of another person’s “inner” with the same certainty that I can “know” my own “inner”. I do not just make assumptions or guesses about what another person is thinking or feeling, I can actually know such things – for example, whether or not he is in pain. Or, as Wittgenstein writes:

I can be as *certain* of someone else’s sensations as of any fact. But this does not make the propositions “He is much depressed”, “ $25 \times 25 = 625$ ” and “I am sixty years old” into similar instruments. The explanation suggests itself that the certainty is of a different *kind*. – This seems to point to a psychological difference. But the difference is logical. [...]

The kind of certainty is the kind of language-game. (PI IIxi, 224)

In other words, Wittgenstein’s grammatical descriptions show that there is a type of certainty and hence of validity (or sufficient reasons) for the statements we make about other people’s consciousness, feelings and psychological states; as for example when we ascribe “hidden” motives to others. But our confidence in the validity of such statements is not comparable to the “formalised (a priori) form” of certainty that is typical in mathematics, with its established rules and procedures (“ $25 \times 25 = 625$ ”), nor with the “corroborated form” of certainty typical of the natural sciences, and which is dependent on the empirical verification of propositions (“I am sixty years old”). But then what does our confidence concerning another person’s “inner” states consist in? What form does it take? Wittgenstein provides several examples, just one of which I shall mention here.

4. My attitude towards him

In a number of contexts, Wittgenstein considers a typical feature of our interpersonal relationships, namely the following: generally speaking

(in everyday situations) we do not doubt whether the people we encounter do or do not possess consciousness. Our immediate way of relating to another person involves a glance that takes them in as “the animated body” (MS 124, 244): “I presuppose the *inner* in so far as I presuppose a *human being*” (LWPP II, 84). In other words, our language games depend on the tacit assumption (what Wittgenstein calls “a natural-historical fact”) that in everyday interactions we are simply preconditioned to perceive others in this way, that there is no need for us first to establish the existence of an “inner” via an “outer”, and then subsequently to justify the connection between the two. The connection is always and already given. “This fact is fused into the foundations of our language-game” (OC §558), and it is there “like our life” (OC §559). “Instead of ‘attitude towards the soul’ one could also say ‘attitude towards a human being’” (LWPP II, 38). “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul. [...] The human body is the best picture of the human soul” (PI IIiv, 178).

The sceptical reservation towards the idea that other people have an “inner” is thus an attitude that neglects the fundamental nature of our language games, which do not admit of any doubt or scepticism on such matters. Essentially, Wittgenstein tells us, we are constituted in such a way that leaves no scope for doubts or hesitation regarding the reality of the other person’s “inner”. Such doubts are always of secondary nature, insofar as we usually react immediately and with the default assumption of there being an internal linkage between the “inner” and the “outer”. The wish to establish, prove or doubt this linkage is essentially meaningless. For it is not possible to distinguish the “outer” from the “inner” on the basis of this “prototypical” (Z §541) feature of our everyday language game. At the most fundamental level of what has to be taken as given conditions, it simply makes no sense to doubt and hence neither is there any sense in seeking to mobilise arguments or evidence for the existence of other minds. The certainty of their occurrence is pre-given.

Wittgenstein maintains and illustrates this observation by pointing out, for example, that we often react immediately to other people’s pain behaviour (Z §§540-541) and facial expressions (RPP II §570). Our use of the concepts of pain, joy, sadness, boredom –

concepts to do with the “inner” – are not always based on “indirect external evidence” or some empirical observation of an “outer”; as if the application of these concepts were always based on inferences from observations and descriptions of certain gestures and facial features. No! We respond immediately to other people’s expressions or utterances of pain, and we recognise facial expressions immediately (i.e. without any kind of intermediary) as tired, worried or elated. Indeed, in most cases we cannot even describe with any precision the anatomical changes responsible for the impression of tiredness, worry or elation. In other words, emotional concepts are internally linked to their animated expressions in the face. “Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face. This is essential to what we call ‘emotion’” (RPP II §570). Here as well our certainty about the other person’s “inner” is a given. – “When mien, gesture and circumstances are unambiguous, then the inner seems to be the outer; it is only when we cannot read the outer that an inner seems to be hidden behind it” (LWPP II, 63).

The summary outlined above is also the contextual framework for one of Wittgenstein’s incidental remarks on the philosophy of religion, in which he briefly compares the immediacy of our “attitude towards a human”, which also encompasses our “attitude towards a soul”, with the religious attitude. In MS 169, Wittgenstein writes:

I could always say of a human that he is an automaton (I could learn it this way in school in physiology) and yet it would not influence my attitude toward someone else. After all, I can also say it about myself.

But what is the difference between an attitude and an opinion?

I would like to say: the attitude comes *before* the opinion.

And he adds tentatively: “(Isn’t belief in God an attitude?)” (LWPP II, 38).

At first sight, it seems reasonable to suggest that the remark “If someone can believe in God with complete certainty, why not in Other Minds?” should also be explored and understood in terms of the abovementioned juxtaposition, which seeks to shed light on the nature of religious faith. It is a juxtaposition that encompasses *in part* a critique

of the widespread assumption that the religious attitude builds on rational deliberations or cognitive insights, and *in part* Wittgenstein's demand that we should view religious belief as an attitude that is characterised by its immediacy and is independent of the individual's will, reflection or reason – an attitude that is based not on “opinions” but on a kind of “instinctive reaction” to circumstances, experience and the problems that confront the individual. Wittgenstein's own example of someone who exhibits and avows a down-to-earth religious attitude characterised by immediacy is Gottfried Keller's Jukundus. Wittgenstein writes: “Jukundus remarks in *Verlorenen Lachen* [*The Lost Smile* (1873–74)] that his religion consist in his knowing – now, when things are going well for him – that his fate could take a turn for the worse. This is really an expression of the same religion as the saying “The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away [Job 1,21]” (CV 47). Jukundus' immediate and fundamental “system of reference” (CV 64), which consists in never expressing “irreverence in speaking of fate or life”, never expecting “that things go well for me, everywhere and as a matter of course”, and always to be prepared for the possibility that everything could instantly be turned to misfortune (Keller 1982, 217), adds up to an attitude that reminds Wittgenstein of Job's acknowledgement of and resignation to life's outcomes. It is an attitude of immediacy that manifests itself in a natural and direct way. It just happens to be this attitude that Jukundus applies to the vicissitudes of his life. “Just like trouble teaches prayer” (MOT 169).

If we now consider our remark in conjunction with this immediately given “attitude toward a human”, “toward a soul” and “belief in God”, it would seem that we can clarify a central aspect of its tentative consideration of the nature of religious belief. However, in doing this, we overlook something crucial, which is that the remark occurs in the context of a discussion of the evidence we require to judge an expression of emotion as sincere.

5. Variability and irregularity

Alongside the aforementioned grammatical descriptions, Wittgenstein returns repeatedly to the question of the conditions and criteria involved in judging other people's feelings and mental states. The

question has to do in part with the nature of psychological concepts and in part with the criteria that underlie the use of those concepts when we attribute them to human beings. So, can we identify recurrent features of the grammar of psychological concepts? And when and under what conditions do “I know” (with certainty) that another person is, for example, worried or anxious? These questions bring us to another theme of central importance in Wittgenstein’s late notebooks, namely his insistence on the indeterminate nature of psychological concepts. Against the sceptical assertion that the “outer” is and can only ever be an indirect and unreliable indicator of something “inner”, and in opposition to “referentialism”, the idea that psychological terms denote discrete and definable mental states or processes, Wittgenstein maintains that, when talking (and making judgements) about other people’s “inner” states, although our linguistic utterances are dependent on “outer” indices, which form the basis for determining the person’s psychological state, these “outer” indices are not as simple and clearly defined as “referentialism” assumes. To put it another way, when it comes to surveying this area of language, Wittgenstein’s insight is, on the one hand, that there are given criteria for (confident) knowledge about other people’s feelings and mental states, and on the other, that these criteria have a characteristic feature of their own: they are indeterminate. Or alternatively: In his late notebooks, Wittgenstein also picks up the thread of one of his comments in TS 213 (*The Big Typescript* (1933)), in which he acknowledges that a certain number of indeterminate terms are a natural constituent of language, and that many of these ambiguous terms are concerned with our characterisation of human beings: “‘Language’ and ‘living being’. The concept of a living being is as indeterminate as / living being has the same indeterminacy as / the concept of language” (BT 146).

Wittgenstein seeks to identify some of the reasons for this aspect of “indeterminacy” among psychological concepts. One of the reasons is the broad scope of possible applications. But he also points out two other reasons: first and foremost, there is the “irregularity” of human physiology, the expressive possibilities of which are vast in range and non-mechanical in nature. In general, our ways of expressing ourselves follow certain patterns. But consider for a moment the spectrum of

our facial expressions (which are so vital when it comes to recognising and attributing emotions in and to other people). Our facial expressions are infinitely variable, fluid and often quite “irregular”. Think of the many ways anger can be expressed in the face, or the many ways a smile can emerge. “A facial expression that was completely fixed couldn’t be a friendly one. Variability and irregularity are essential to a friendly expression. Irregularity is part of its physiognomy” (RPP II §615). “Why should a *movement* not belong to a smile? ‘There’s something mechanical about that smile.’ ‘Actually it is not a real smile at all.’” (LWPP II, 46). Another reason for this aspect of “indeterminacy” is the unpredictability of our forms of expression. In the course of an exchange of views, one’s interlocutor might never adopt certain expected facial expressions while at the same time using others that were unforeseen. “Life’s infinite variations are essential to our life. And so too even to the habitual character of life. What we regard as expression *consists* in incalculability. If I knew exactly how he would grimace, move, there would be no facial expression, no gesture” (CV 73). Or, as we read in MS 174: “That this fluctuation is an important part of our life. But how can one say at all that it is something *fluctuating*? Against what do I measure its fluctuation? Well, there are countless configurations of smiling, for instance. And smiling that is smiling, and smiling that is not” (LWPP II, 81).

6. Imponderable evidence and subjective certainty

The abovementioned grammatical descriptions concerning the “indeterminacy” of certain terms is essential to an understanding of Wittgenstein’s remarks about the confidence we feel in connection with our use of psychological concepts. As the descriptions show, in many situations, the criteria for the use of psychological concepts can be as “fluctuating” or “variable” as those forms of expression themselves. Acknowledging this, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two types of evidence for other people’s feelings and mental states. A distinction is made between “ponderable” and “imponderable” evidence. This now familiar distinction is posited in *Philosophical Investigations* Part II: “It is certainly possible to be convinced by evidence that someone is in such-and-such a state of mind, that, for

instance, he is not pretending. But ‘evidence’ here includes ‘imponderable’ evidence.” Wittgenstein elaborates as follows:

The question is: what does imponderable evidence *accomplish*?

Suppose there were imponderable evidence for the chemical (internal) structure of a substance, still it would have to prove itself to be evidence by certain consequences which *can* be weighed.

(Imponderable evidence might convince someone that a picture was a genuine [...] But it is *possible* for this to be proved right by documentary evidence as well.) (PI IIxi, 228)

The term “evidence” refers here to all the features of another person’s expressions and behaviour that I find noteworthy, and which form the basis for an assertion to the effect that the other person is manifesting a certain feeling or a certain mental state. Wittgenstein emphasises that the evidence here can take the form either of something fairly precise and unambiguous, or of something more “ambiguous”; a fleeting indication that something is being withheld (a feeling of antipathy or sympathy), conveyed for example by a slight tremor in the voice or a merely cursory gesture. Here is another example:

Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone.

I may recognise a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a ‘ponderable’ confirmation of my judgment). But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference. And this not because the languages I know have no words for it. For why not introduce new words? – If I were a very talented painter I might conceivably represent the genuine and the simulated glance in pictures.

Ask yourself: How does a man learn to get an ‘eye’ for something? And how can this eye be used? (PI IIxi, 228)

The realisation that the evidence that justifies my judgements about the feelings and mental states of others – what Wittgenstein also refers to as “subjective certainty” – can range from the “ponderable” to the “imponderable” inevitably leads us to ask what the precise

characteristics are of judgements that build on “imponderable evidence”. Addressing this question, Wittgenstein seeks to convince us that a particular kind of certainty is involved in our judgements, and this despite the fact that “imponderable evidence” often infuses our judgements with an element of indecisiveness, an open-endedness or “constructive ambivalence”; in other words, an aspect of hesitation, insofar as these judgements are based on our observations and assessments of such “imponderable evidence”. What Wittgenstein tells us is that the “imponderable” nature of certain evidence, the “indeterminacy” of certain concepts, and the “constructive ambivalence” of our judgements, are not attributable to any lack of ability or knowledge. Indeterminacy and uncertainty are rather a particular and unavoidable feature of psychological concepts, due to the fact that the latter relate to our variability and irregularity of verbal and physical expression. Wittgenstein emphasises, however, that this feature does not oblige us to conclude, as the sceptic does, that the kind of certainty associated with these judgements is any less valid than objective certainty. “Need I be less certain that someone is suffering pain than that $12 \times 12 = 144$?” (LWPP II, 92). No! “The kind of certainty is the kind of language-game” (PI IIxi, 224). Subjective certainty is not just a less valuable form of certainty. Rather, this is the form that certainty takes when we talk about other people’s feelings and mental states. In these language games our judgements are not always anchored in clearly definable factors, but rather in judgements concerning imponderable evidence and in the frequently diffuse expectations about people’s subsequent behaviour. “There is uncertainty and there is certainty; but from this it does not follow that there are criteria that are certain” (LWPP II, 87).

Objective certainty depends primarily on clear and established rules. Here we act on the basis of a learned technique (PI §§199, 239–242). Mathematical certainty and, for example, our certainty in connection with colour statements, are attributable to learned sets of rules. Wittgenstein writes:

Of course, in one sense mathematics is a branch of knowledge – but still it is also an *activity*. And ‘false moves’ can only exist as the exception. For if what we now call by that name became the rule,

the game in which they were false moves would have been abrogated.

“We all learn the same multiplication table.” This might, no doubt, be a remark about the teaching of arithmetic in our schools, – but also an observation about the concept of the multiplication table. (“In a horse-race the horses generally run as fast as they can.”)

There is such a thing as colour-blindness and there are ways of establishing it. There is in general complete agreement in the judgments of colours made by those who have been diagnosed normal. This characterises the concept of a judgment of colour. (PI IIxi, 227)

Subjective certainty is also dependent on certain rules, “but they [the rules] do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculation rules” (PI IIxi, 227), for the use of psychological concepts does not depend exclusively on acquired technical competence. For their application also depends on each individual’s “Menschenkenntnis [knowledge of people]”, in other words, on the horizon established by the individual’s interpersonal experience – the horizon defined by our biographical and in some ways arbitrary experience. “Menschenkenntnis” can be learned. “Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through ‘experience’. [...] What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements” (PI IIxi, 227). Our “eye” for and our immediate impressions of other people’s emotional expressions and mental states are outcomes of our “better” or “worse” judgement (PI IIxi, 227) about other persons – a capacity that derives from the experience I accumulate in the course of my life and “all the strange things I see, and have seen and heard about, in myself and others” (RFGB 151). Our foundation here is certain rules and “[e]xperiences, thoughts, – life” (CV 86). The anchorage point for our judgement is not a technical or formal skill we have learned “by taking a course”, but an ability to discern correctly – an ability we have acquired “through ‘experience’”.

This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. – What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. [...] Experience, that is varied observation, can inform us of

them, and they too are incapable of general formulation; only in scattered cases can one arrive at a correct and fruitful judgment, establish a fruitful connexion. And the most general remarks yield at best what looks like the fragments of a system. (PI IIxi, 227–228)

The evidence for and the certainty of our judgements relating to other people's feelings, the sincerity of expressions of emotion and mental conditions manifest a grammar that is different from the one that applies in mathematics and the natural sciences. "Subjective and objective certainty. Why do I want to say '2 x 2 = 4' is objectively certain, and 'This man is in pain' only subjectively?" (LWPP II, 23).

Wittgenstein's incidental remark on the philosophy of religion in MS 137 – during a discussion of how we assess the sincerity of expressions of emotion, in which he also asks about the nature of the evidence and the justification for certainty – can now be viewed in light of the grammatical observations described above. The conjecture revolves around the question of "imponderable evidence" and "subjective certainty", or more precisely around the family resemblances between, on the one hand, the supposed preconditions for and certainty we feel in our judgements about other people's feelings, emotions and mental states, and, on the other, the preconditions for and certainty we feel in connection with religious faith, propositions and judgements.

7. The swaying scaffolding

If I now assert Wittgenstein's incidental remark about a similarity between, on the one hand, what is involved in perceiving another person's emotional state and being convinced of its sincerity, and, on the other, the religious attitude, which has many points in common with the way we relate to other human beings – further, if I now assert that the statements and judgements of the religious attitude manifest a grammar that is related to that of our judgements about other people's mental and emotional states – then it would appear that Wittgenstein's remark implies a number of possible conjectures about religious beliefs

and the grammar of religious language. In the following I shall confine myself to four different points.

Firstly, (i): the supposed horizon of religious belief – which here includes the foundations of religious statements and judgements – is an experiential horizon that cannot be formalised. The foundation of religious beliefs is a non-systemic, non-theoretical horizon that stands in relation to a broad range of issues, feelings, experiences, thoughts, answers and “pictures”. The “most general remarks” about this horizon “yield at best what looks like the fragments of a system” (PI IIxi, 228). The soil in which religious faith grows is of an extremely complex nature and is related to conditions of people’s lives and their general experience. In Wittgenstein’s own words:

It goes without saying that a man’s shadow, which looks like him, or his mirror-image, the rain, thunderstorms, the phases of the moon, the changing of the seasons, the way in which animals are similar to and different from one another and in relation to man, the phenomena of death, birth, and sexual life, in short, everything we observe around us year in and year out, interconnected in so many different ways, will play a part in his thinking (his philosophy) and in his practices, or is precisely what we really know and find interesting. (RFGB 129)

This statement makes the point that the representations of so-called secondary descriptions – the attempts of philosophy to capture, portray or depict, and the accounts of dogmatics or theological studies and the efforts of systematic theology to substantiate and update, and the descriptions and classifications of psychology – all threaten to undermine this crucial feature and to infuse or burden the assumed horizon of religious belief with a “scholastic” element. Wittgenstein writes: “Grief describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life” (PI IIi, 174). And echoing this, I am tempted to say: “Religious belief, ‘belief in God with complete certainty’ describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life.”

Next we have (ii): the judgements on which this belief depends and which it encompasses are reached by means of a kind of “practical judgement”, the frame for which is the believer’s own complex and

branching “network” of experiences of life and the “vague” criteria for a kind of “imponderable evidence” that go along with it – the “subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone” (PI Ixi, 228) that play a part in our interpersonal relationships, in life and the world. Thus Wittgenstein’s incidental remark draws attention to the fact that the nature of the grammar, evidence and certainty associated with religious convictions and statements is different from these things in the case of scientific judgements and statements. What Wittgenstein tells us by means of his remark is that there is a kind of evidence and a subjective certainty in the case of religious belief and belief in God, which is often difficult to pin down and define, but which serves to justify those beliefs and provides a kind of certainty for them. The certainty we are talking about is, however, subjective rather than objective. A few days after penning this incidental remark, Wittgenstein wrote in MS 137: “An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it” (CV 73). The “imponderable evidence” and “the subjective certainty” are the supporting threads of the tightrope-walker’s rope.

Which brings us to (iii): Wittgenstein’s remark suggests the possibility of an answer to the question he raises late in his writings: How could one “convince someone that God exists”? (CV 85). The question of how one could be gripped by or could acquire a religious attitude can now be viewed as similar to the question: “How does a man learn to get an ‘eye’ for something? And how can this eye be used?” Wittgenstein suggests that the “catechetical teaching” needed here must take the form of providing the right hint. Similar to the way in which we would learn to acquire an “eye” for, or to distinguish between, “a genuine loving look” and “a pretended one” (PI Ixi, 228). Wittgenstein points out that “[l]ife can educate one to a belief in God”, “[e]xperiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us” (CV 86), and he suggests that the religious “eye” can be opened if the individual is occasionally given “the right *tip* [den richtigen *Wink*]” (PI Ixi, 227). The acquisition of religious belief or belief in God can proceed via a referring gesture, in the form not of one that points something out ostensively, but of one that directs attention towards patterns, nuances of experience and connections that produce meaning – one learns to

see certain connections. (Theologie als den richtigen Wink.) “This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. – What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculation rules” (PI Iixi, 227). – In MS 136 Wittgenstein notes: “Silent praying; often just a sequence of indicated thoughts. Comparable to mere hints” (MS 136, 54b).

But perhaps most essentially (iv): Wittgenstein’s inspiration comes across as a reminder or, to put it another way, a rebuke. Insofar as his remark – “If someone can believe in God with complete certainty, why not in Other Minds?” – constitutes a rebuttal of the philosophy of religion’s “referentialist” descriptions or definitions of religious belief or belief in God and the religious attitude in general, in other words, a rebuttal of the assumption that the primary function of religious language is to name or refer to clearly defined or definable objects or activities, including certain typical internal or mental states or processes that involve “ponderable evidence” and “objective certainty”. In contrast, Wittgenstein reminds us that the religious attitude exhibits a number of fundamental characteristics: variability, irregularity and indeterminacy. The native soil of religious belief is an unstable relationship to life and the world. – Or, to put it slightly differently, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke (2008, 31):

We climb the swaying scaffolding, our hammers
weighing heavy in the hand, and wait
for the moment that the forehead takes the kiss
of radiance, when an hour that holds the key
comes from you, like the wind from off the sea.

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