

WITTGENSTEIN, RELIGIOUS BELIEF, AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

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Abstract

Wittgenstein begins his *Lectures on Religious Belief* by saying that he would not contradict a religious person's belief in the Last Judgement, even though he personally does not share such beliefs. Later, he expresses uncertainty about whether religious believers and non-believers truly understand each other. Some philosophers interpret these remarks as showing that Wittgenstein thought that the religious and the non-religious discourse are incommensurable, in the sense that a non-religious person cannot understand a religious person when they are talking about their beliefs, and that religious beliefs are immune to outside criticism as a consequence of the supposed incommensurability. Hilary Putnam claimed that Wittgenstein believed that the dialogue between religious and non-religious individuals involves talking past each other, not due to incommensurability but for other reasons. I propose an alternative perspective on the "no contradiction situation" and Wittgenstein's stance on religious belief, while agreeing with Putnam that the incommensurability thesis cannot be attributed to Wittgenstein.

KEYWORDS: Hilary Putnam, incommensurability, Ludwig Wittgenstein, religious belief

Wittgenstein, religious belief and incommensurability

In this paper, I will deal with one of the interpretative problems of Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief*, which were delivered in 1938 and

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published in 1966. These lectures are notoriously challenging to interpret for two reasons. First, they were compiled from notes taken by one or more of his students, resulting in a fragmentary text with incomplete sentences, possibly not recorded in the right order. It is very challenging to discern whether something is Wittgenstein's own view or the view of one of his students. Second, the lectures are "loaded with content," covering a lot despite the text itself being only about twenty pages long. This means we can focus our attention on many different themes and aspects, potentially leading to various, and often conflicting, interpretations even of a single sentence or remark.

In what follows, I will be presenting arguably the central problem posed by these lectures and follow this with Hilary Putnam's perspective on it. Subsequently, I will highlight some issues with Putnam's interpretation and conclude with my understanding of Wittgenstein's stance.

1. *The problem*

At the outset of the initial lecture, Wittgenstein says that he would not contradict a religious person who professes belief in the Last Judgement or the Resurrection, despite his lack of belief in such matters.

Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: "not at all, or not always."

Suppose I say that the body will rot, and another says "No. Particles will rejoin in a thousand years, and there will be a Resurrection of you."

If some said: "Wittgenstein, do you believe in this?" I'd say: "No." "Do you contradict the man?" I'd say: "No." (Wittgenstein 1967, 53)

This theme recurs throughout the lectures, with Wittgenstein repeatedly asserting that he would not, and sometimes could not, contradict a religious believer regarding Judgement Day or the afterlife. However, a paradox arises when he states that "the body will rot," while a believer insists "that there will be a Resurrection". Similarly, if a religious individual says that she believes there will be the Last Judgement, and Wittgenstein says that he does not believe in that, how can there be no contradiction? Wittgenstein insists that not having the belief in the Last Judgement does not commit him to having the belief in the opposite—that there will not be a Last Judgement. The lecture then proceeds:

If you say this, the contradiction already lies in this.

Would you say: "I believe the opposite", or "There is no reason to suppose such a thing"? I'd say neither. (Wittgenstein 1967, 53)

So, how is it possible that Wittgenstein and a non-believer do not disagree with a believer or do not contradict her belief? Hilary Putnam wrote regarding Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief* that perhaps "the only thing that is absolutely clear" about those lectures is that "Wittgenstein believes that the religious man and the atheist talk past one another" (Putnam 1992a, 143). It seems that, according to Putnam, Wittgenstein thinks that they talk past each other because, under normal circumstances, they would contradict one another: "the believer making a claim and the atheist asserts its negation" (Putnam 1992a, 143).

For instance, in usual circumstances, when one says, "There is a God" and the other replies, "God doesn't exist" or "There isn't," or "I believe there will be the Judgement Day" and the atheist replies, "I believe there won't be the Judgement Day," they would contradict each other. We would usually think that the religious believer and the atheist contradict each other, while, in reality, they talk past each other, engaging in discussions about entirely different matters. Putnam appears to argue that some miscommunication or failure of mutual understanding between the two parties led Wittgenstein to assert that there is no contradiction between the things they say. Therefore, the problem is to determine why Wittgenstein thinks that the religious person and the non-religious person, or the atheist, do not contradict one another, or why he claims that the relation between them is not one of contradiction, despite appearances to the contrary. Why does he maintain that "these controversies look quite different from any normal controversies" (Wittgenstein 1967, 56)? In an attempt to answer this question, I will turn to Putnam's reading because I find it the most fruitful, even though I am going to criticize it later.

2. *Putnam's interpretation*

Putnam claims that there are at least three possible interpretations or reasons for Wittgenstein's insistence on the "no contradiction situation": the incommensurability thesis, expressivism, and non-cognitivism. In ethics, expressivism is usually regarded as a version of non-cognitivism; therefore, it might appear odd to treat it as a distinct option or position in this context. Here, I am simply following Putnam without delving further into his reasons for such categorization. Are these the only options? I am not certain; cognitivism obviously would not work here because, in that case, an atheist would contradict a religious believer's statements. Nevertheless, Putnam dismisses the notion that any of these can be attributed to Wittgenstein and provides his own interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks. On the other hand, the position I am proposing may be seen as a fourth alternative, sharing certain aspects with non-cognitivism but differing from Putnam's interpretation.

2.1. The incommensurability thesis

According to the first interpretation, “Wittgenstein thinks that religious language and ordinary empirical language are incommensurable forms of discourse. The non-religious person simply *can’t understand* the religious person” (Putnam 1992a, 147–148). In Putnam’s perspective, the incommensurability thesis posits that “the two speakers aren’t able to communicate because their words have different ‘meanings’” (Putnam 1992a, 152). Wittgenstein hinted at the incommensurability reading when he stated the following:

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.

It isn’t a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane, which you could express by saying: “You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein.” (Wittgenstein 1967, 53)

You might say: “Well, if you can’t contradict him, that means you don’t understand him. If you did understand him, then you might.” (Wittgenstein 1967, 55)

The incommensurability reading is the most popular interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks about the “no contradiction situation”. The thesis of supposed incommensurability between religious and non-religious discourse was famously attributed to prominent Wittgensteinians like Peter Winch and Norman Malcolm by Kai Nielsen (Nielsen 1967)¹, even before Wittgenstein’s *Lectures* were published. In the words of Brian Clack, Wittgenstein’s followers “applied leitmotifs of the *Philosophical Investigations*” to religion, turning it into “a ‘language–game’, a ‘form of life’ neither requiring justification nor susceptible to criticism or explanation” (Clack 2003, 12). According to Nielsen, Wittgensteinians, and perhaps even Wittgenstein himself, separated or compartmentalized religion from other forms of life. They claimed that religious language is incommensurable with other forms of discourse and, as a consequence, that religious belief is immune from outside criticism. Nielsen named this position “Wittgensteinian Fideism”.

Many rejected the incommensurability reading, including Cora Diamond, who deemed it “plainly false” (Diamond 2005, 113), Simon Blackburn (Blackburn 2015), Martin Kusch (Kusch 2011), and Putnam, who wrote that Wittgenstein would regard the incommensurability thesis as “a useless thing to say” (Putnam 1992a, 148). The core of Putnam’s reading lies in his claim that Wittgenstein did not equate *every* difference in the use of a word with a difference in meaning. Pointing out that religious and non-re-

1 Nielsen refers to (Malcolm 1960, 1964) and (Winch 1958, 1964).

religious people use words in different ways does not necessarily imply that those words mean different things to them (Putnam 1992a, 151). That is why Wittgenstein replies to the objection by suggesting he means something altogether different with: “The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of meaning” (Wittgenstein 1967, 53). According to Putnam, this is because “the difference in these two uses is not something that we would ordinarily call a difference in meaning” (Putnam 1992a, 151). Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that Wittgenstein occasionally claims that he understands what the religious believer meant, but also admits uncertainty about whether to assert that he truly understands her or not.

If Mr. Lewy is religious and says he believes in a Judgement Day, I won't even know whether to say I understand him or not. I've read the same things as he's read. In a most important sense, I know what he means.

If an atheist says: “There won't be a Judgment Day, and another person says there will,” do they mean the same? — Not clear what criterion of meaning the same is. (Wittgenstein 1967, 58)

From this, Putnam concludes that Wittgenstein thought that in an ordinary sense of meaning the same, one might say that the religious believer and the atheist do mean the same, although Wittgenstein is hesitant to assert that. More importantly, Putnam believes that Wittgenstein would genuinely “dismiss the question whether the words mean the same, that is, whether the sentence means the same, as of no help here”, and that is “precisely to dismiss ‘incommensurability’ talk” (Putnam 1992a, 152). This would explain why Wittgenstein says that it is not clear what criterion of meaning the same is.

2.2. Expressivism

Another interpretation considered by Putnam suggests that “the religious person and the non-religious person *can understand* one another, but the non-religious person is using the language literally, and the religious person is using it in some non-literal way, perhaps emotively, or ‘to express an attitude’” (Putnam 1992a, 148). Because a religious person is *only* expressing her attitudes when saying that she believes in something, there can be no contradiction between hers and the sentences a non-religious person would utter. Putnam rejected this expressivist interpretation on the basis of something Wittgenstein said in the lectures and also on the grounds of his own anti-expressivist position in metaethics.

Suppose someone, before going to China, when he might never see me again, said to me: “We might see one another after death” — would I necessarily say that I don't understand him? I might say [want to say] simply, “Yes. I *understand* him entirely.”

Lewy “In this case, you might only mean that he expressed a certain attitude.” I would say “No, it isn’t the same as saying ‘I’m very fond of you’” — and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. (Wittgenstein 1967, 71–72)

Here, Putnam correctly observes that Wittgenstein clearly opposes expressivism—the idea that the *only* function of “religious” sentences is to express some attitude or feeling. I will not delve into Putnam’s other, not strictly Wittgenstein-related, reasons for rejecting this interpretation right now, but I will discuss it more later.

2.3. Non-cognitivism

The last interpretation suggests that Wittgenstein believed that “ordinary discourse is ‘cognitive’ and the religious person is making some kind of ‘non-cognitive’ use of language” (Putnam 1992a, 148). According to non-cognitivism about religious language, sentences uttered by a believer do not express propositions and thus cannot be true or false. If the religious person is using language in this way, then there can be no contradiction between hers and the sentences an atheist would say.

Putnam interprets Wittgenstein’s remarks about the use of pictures by religious people as something akin to non-cognitivism and poses the question: “Isn’t Wittgenstein hinting that when one speaks of the Eye of God or the Last Judgement one is *merely* using a picture, that is to say, one isn’t referring to anything?” (Putnam 1992b, 158). Although Putnam is concerned that Wittgenstein may be suggesting that religious language does not refer to anything (Putnam 1992b, 159), he dismisses that reading in a manner similar to the question of incommensurability. Putnam claims that Wittgenstein “would not have regarded the question as to whether religious language *refers* as helpful”, because there are many different ways of “referring” and “the use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference”, so asking whether religious language “really refers is to be in a muddle” (Putnam 1992b, 168).

Putnam’s suggested interpretation of the “no contradiction situation” is that Wittgenstein likely held that “religious discourse can be understood in any depth only by understanding the form of life to which it belongs”. That means that “understanding the words of a religious person properly — whether you want to speak of understanding their ‘meaning’ or not — is inseparable from understanding a religious form of life, and this is not a matter of ‘semantic theory’, but a matter of understanding a human being” (Putnam 1992a, 154).

Despite rejecting the incommensurability thesis, Putnam appears to suggest that some form of incommensurability, perhaps partial, could explain Wittgenstein’s insistence that a non-believer does not contradict a religious

person. However, this would not be semantic incommensurability or a matter of meaning. For this reason, Putnam poses the question, “In what way Wittgenstein means to deny the commensurability or homophony of religious and non-religious discourse” (Putnam 1992a, 143). According to his proposal, Wittgenstein claims that a non-believer could not contradict a religious person, because she lacks a complete understanding of the words of the religious person, due to her failure to fully grasp what characterizes a religious form of life.

Before I turn to the criticism of Putnam’s reading, I will briefly mention two other interesting explanations of Wittgenstein’s “no contradiction situation”. Cora Diamond (Diamond 2005) thinks that in the *Lectures*, Wittgenstein argued against his Tractarian idea of “logical space”, closely resembling Frege’s notion of the “thinkableness of all thoughts”. According to Diamond, Frege held that there is a stock of thoughts that are available to us as thinking beings. If it is possible for someone to believe that p , or not p , then p is thinkable for all thinkers; it is possible for someone to either believe p or deny it, and this rule out the “no contradiction situation” (Diamond 2005, 100–104). While this would offer an explanation, there is no clear evidence that Wittgenstein scrutinized the Frege/*Tractatus* idea in the *Lectures*, even though it is not entirely impossible given that the *Lectures* belong to the “transitory period”².

On the other hand, Martin Kusch (Kusch 2011) argues that the “no contradiction situation” can be easily explained by Wittgenstein’s apparent distinction between two different propositional belief-attitudes: the ordinary (hypothesis) and the extraordinary belief-attitudes (faith). Wittgenstein does not contradict the religious person because he holds the ordinary belief-attitude toward the proposition about Judgement Day (“I have hypothesis that there won’t be the Last Judgement”), while the religious person has the extraordinary belief-attitude (“I have faith that there will be the Last Judgement”). The textual evidence in the *Lectures* supports Kusch’s claims, but I will not engage with his reading here.

3. *Problems with Putnam’s reading*

When it comes down to Putnam’s dismissal of expressivist and non-cognitivist interpretations of the “no contradiction situation”, I do not think Put-

2 Putnam seems to think that the *Lectures* belong to the transitional period (Putnam 1992a, 142), but there is doubt regarding this claim. While their content notably resembles some of Wittgenstein’s ideas from the transitional period, it is essential to note that the lectures were delivered in 1938, by which time a substantial portion of the initial paragraphs of *Philosophical Investigations* had already been completed.

nam is quite right. First of all, I agree with Putnam that Wittgenstein clearly rejects expressivism, as stated by Lewy —the thesis that religious statements are meant *solely* to express a certain attitude. Wittgenstein does not deny that they can be used to express an attitude or that conveying a certain attitude or feeling is one of their functions, but he firmly emphasizes that it cannot be their *only* function. As noted by Simon Blackburn (Blackburn 2015), Wittgenstein does not rule out the possibility of a position, analogous to Blackburn's own metaethical standpoint, where religious statements have a descriptive component alongside an expressive one. If we look, as Blackburn suggests, to Wittgenstein's later remarks in *Culture and Value*, we shall see that Wittgenstein ties a religious frame of mind to “passions, feelings, emotions and attitudes” (Blackburn 2015, 743). According to Blackburn, sentences uttered by a religious person need “some additional words, an explanation or interpretation”; those sentences do not simply “say what they say”, as that would lead to a contradiction. For example, when a Christian says that the Virgin Mary bore a child, and a historian or biologist denies that such an event ever happened, if each “says what they say”, then each contradicts the other, claims Blackburn (Blackburn 2015, 741). However, I disagree with Blackburn's assertion that Wittgenstein would permit religious statements to have a descriptive component, as I will explain shortly.

On the other hand, Brian Clack (Clack 2003) agrees that Wittgenstein rejected Putnamian expressivism but also argues that, by considering Wittgenstein's *overall* remarks about religion (not just what he says in the *Lectures*), it becomes evident that Wittgenstein, beyond any doubt, believed there is an expressive function of religious statements. According to Clack, the real question is what other function religious sentences have in Wittgenstein's opinion. The question of whether Wittgenstein thought that religious statements have a descriptive function leads us to the evaluation of Putnam's stance concerning Wittgenstein's alleged non-cognitivism.

The primary issue with Putnam's reading lies in the fact that many passages in the *Lectures* seem to support non-cognitivism rather than contradict it. From the reading of the *Lectures*, the reader gets the impression that Wittgenstein cannot emphasize enough that religious statements should not be confused with empirical or historical propositions, hypotheses, or predictions.

We don't talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing.

Here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts. Even, they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions. (Wittgenstein 1967, 57)

Moreover, Wittgenstein insists that religious beliefs are not based on evidence and that they are neither reasonable nor unreasonable, nor do religious people treat them as a matter of reasonability (Wittgenstein 1967,

57). It seems that Wittgenstein would not consider religious statements as something that can be either true or false, making it challenging to envision a descriptive component of religious statements, which directly contradicts Blackburn. In fact, by examining what he says in the *Lectures* and elsewhere, it appears that he probably thought that there is a normative component or function of religious statements alongside an expressive one. In the *Lectures*, Wittgenstein speaks about certain religious beliefs functioning as pictures that are always on the minds of religious people, guiding their lives, and against which everything they do or happens to them is evaluated.

Here believing obviously plays much more this role: suppose we said that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it. Here, an enormous difference would be between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just didn't use it at all. (Wittgenstein 1967, 56)

Suppose somebody made this guidance for this life: believing in the Last Judgement. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not? (Wittgenstein 1967, 53)

So, it appears that the things Wittgenstein says are much closer to non-cognitivism than Putnam supposes, which would explain why he thinks a religious believer and an atheist do not contradict one another.

Finally, the question of incommensurability. I agree with Putnam that the incommensurability thesis cannot be attributed to Wittgenstein, but I am not sure that his thesis of “partial incommensurability” is the correct interpretation. I think, as Putnam does, that the crucial evidence against the incommensurability reading is Wittgenstein's remark that the difference might not show up at all in any explanation of meaning. The difference between the things the religious person and the non-believer say is not a difference in meaning. However, in his reading, Putnam places too much emphasis on Wittgenstein's claims that he can understand what the religious believer talks about. Wittgenstein often claims that he cannot decide whether the religious believer and the atheist understand each other, or whether they mean the same because it is not clear what the criterion of “meaning the same” is.

My understanding of the situation described by Wittgenstein aligns closely with Diamond's interpretation from one of her earlier articles. Diamond claimed that Wittgenstein argued that “our ordinary ways of talking about meaning and understanding are no help to us in the kinds of cases being discussed in the lecture” (Diamond and Gerrard 1999, 103–104). She believes that Wittgenstein eventually *had not decided* whether the religious person and the atheist mean the same or understand each other, and she offers a plausible explanation for this uncertainty. According to Diamond, when Wittgenstein said that the difference might not show up at all in any

explanation of meaning, he had in mind “an important feature of the use of many expressions, namely, that if we are given an explanation of meaning, we go on to use the expression in much the same ways”, but “in the case Wittgenstein is describing, that normal response to the explanation of meaning is absent”. That is the main reason “why we have the two contrasting reactions to the case: an inclination to say, if we think about the great difference in use, that the two people do not mean the same, and an inclination to say, if we note that there are not here two different explanations of meaning, that the meaning is the same” (Diamond and Gerrard 1999, 104).

Diamond’s conclusion was that in the *Lectures*, Wittgenstein did not simply identify the difference in meaning with difference in use in all cases (Diamond and Gerrard 1999, 105). However, in a later article, it seems to me that Diamond is suggesting something very close to Putnam’s proposal about partial understanding or partial incommensurability. There, she speaks about “an intertwining movement of words in human lives” as an alternative to the Fregean idea of stock of thoughts (Diamond 2005, 113–114), and such movement is supposedly necessary for making sense of our words and those of other people (Miguens 2020, 411). I believe that it is better to adhere to the idea that Wittgenstein was reluctant to decide whether the two people in question mean the same or understand each other because, in my opinion, that idea is closer to the spirit of the *Lectures*. At the same time, this deprives us of one possible explanation of the “no contradiction situation”, leaving us with something possibly similar to the expressivist or non-cognitivist reading, but I think that Wittgenstein would have rejected those readings. Even though, as we have seen, some of Wittgenstein’s remarks lean towards non-cognitivism by apparently claiming that religious statements can be neither true nor false, Wittgenstein’s overall disdain for “philosophical theories” of religion would likely prevent him from declaring himself a non-cognitivist. I acknowledge that this may seem inconsistent; however, I believe this discomfort can be alleviated by adopting a probable perspective on Wittgenstein’s goals in the lectures.

4. *Philosophical arrogance*

What I believe Wittgenstein is doing in the *Lectures* is not attempting to put forward any philosophical theory; instead, he is grappling with what he perceives as erroneous theories about religious belief and the nature of religious language. Consequently, he would likely dismiss all interpretations discussed here and I think that that goes in line with his overall philosophical methodology. Putnam and Diamond have also noted this aspect of Wittgenstein’s philosophizing in the lectures. Putnam wrote that Wittgenstein is telling us “what isn’t the way to understand religious language” (Putnam 1992b,

168). Throughout the lectures, it is evident that Wittgenstein is constantly attacking the views of his students, especially Smythies's and Lewy's, or at least what he takes to be their views, which was not unusual according to Diamond. Furthermore, Wittgenstein is also rejecting what he deems to be other wrong theories about religion. He heavily criticized the views of a certain Father O'Hara for trying to base religious belief on scientific evidence.

But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons. (Wittgenstein 1967, 57)

We observed that Wittgenstein rejected the claim that religious statements are incorrect scientific hypotheses or highly improbable, unreasonable predictions. Additionally, I believe that Wittgenstein would firmly reject Wittgensteinian fideism in this same spirit present in the lectures. He employed the notions of the language game and the form of life to dispel erroneous philosophical thinking, not to encapsulate religion in a self-contained form of life, discontinuous with other aspects of human life.

Wittgenstein used the “no contradiction situation” as an example to demonstrate to his students how such a seemingly simple everyday scenario could give rise to numerous wrong philosophical theories or ways of thinking. In the end, there appears to be no entirely satisfactory explanation of why the non-believer in the Last Judgement could not contradict the believer. Perhaps Wittgenstein thought that there shouldn't be any philosophical explanation at all. The perplexing situation merely serves to highlight errors in our philosophical thinking. Perhaps Wittgenstein believed that that is sufficient, and there is no need for a complicated philosophical analysis. Any attempt to say something more might be philosophically arrogant.

If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant. (Wittgenstein 1967, 72)

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*Sažetak***WITTGENSTEIN, RELIGIOZNO VJEROVANJE I NESUMJERLJIVOST**

NIKOLA STAMENKOVIĆ

Wittgenstein započinje svoja *Predavanja o religioznom vjerovanju* tvrdeći kako ne bi proturječio religioznoj osobi koja vjeruje u Strašni sud, iako on osobno ne dijeli takva uvjerenja. Kasnije izjavljuje kako nije siguran mogu li religiozni vjernici i pojedinci koji ne vjeruju istinski razumjeti jedni druge. Neki filozofi tumače ove primjedbe kao dokaz da je Wittgenstein smatrao kako su religijski i nereligijski diskursi nesumjerljivi, u tom smislu da nereligiozna osoba ne može razumjeti religioznu kada ova govori o svojim vjerovanjima, kao i da su religiozna vjerovanja imuna na kritiku izvana kao posljedica te navodne nesumjerljivosti. Hilary Putnam je tvrdio da je Wittgenstein vjerovao kako dijalog između religioznih i nereligioznih osoba podrazumijeva određeno nesporazumijevanje, koje međutim nije posljedica nesumjerljivosti. Predlažem drugačije sagledavanje „nesuprotstavljenosti“ i Wittgensteinovog shvaćanja religioznog vjerovanja, pri čemu se slažem s Putnamom da se teza o nesumjerljivosti ne može pripisati Wittgensteinu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Hilary Putnam, nesumjerljivost, Ludwig Wittgenstein, religiozno vjerovanje

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