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# BELIEF IN A GOOD AND LOVING GOD: A CASE STUDY IN THE VARIETIES OF A RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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**ABSTRACT:** There has been much recent debate over the meaning of the claim that God is good and loving. Although the participants in this debate strongly disagree over the correct analysis of the claim, there is nonetheless agreement across all parties that there is a single correct analysis. This paper aims to overthrow this consensus, by showing that sentences such as ‘There is a good and loving God’ are often used to express a variety of beliefs with quite different logico-grammatical characteristics. Belief in a good and loving God might range from being an evidentially grounded and empirically falsifiable ontological hypothesis, all the way to being a belief which is both ungrounded and unfalsifiable, and more akin to an attitude than to an hypothesis. The logical variety exhibited by the belief in a good and loving God often gives rise, in turn, to people holding that belief in a way that is indeterminate, mixed, or fluid between those different varieties. That is, someone’s belief in a good and loving God may hover indeterminately between more than one logical variety of the belief; or it may mix together some of the logical characteristics of different varieties of the belief; or it may change from having one logical character to another and perhaps back again. These properties are often masked by the fact that the belief is always expressed by the same sentence regardless of any indeterminacy, mixedness, or fluidity. Though these properties are rarely discussed by analytic philosophers of religion, logico-grammatical variety, indeterminacy, mixedness, and fluidity are pervasive in religious beliefs and utterances, and account for much of those beliefs and utterances’ real-life complexity. This paper will make a start at an examination of these important properties by using the belief in a good and loving God as a representative case study.

## 1. Introduction

In the early 1950s Antony Flew contributed a short but thought-provoking paper to a symposium entitled ‘Theology and Falsification’.<sup>1</sup> Flew concluded his paper with the following question:

Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say ‘God does not love us’ or even ‘God does not exist’? I ... put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, ‘What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?’<sup>2</sup>

Flew gives the impression that he takes this question to confront the religious believer with a fatal dilemma. For he seems to think that, on the one hand, the believer will not want to say that his belief in a good and loving God is falsifiable, because then he would most likely need to admit that it had actually already been falsified; and he seems to think that, on the other hand, neither will the believer want to say that his belief in a good and loving God is *not* falsifiable, because this would mean that the belief has no informational content, and this would put it beyond the pale of orthodoxy. Many philosophers of religion have taken up Flew’s challenge. Most picked one or other of the horns of Flew’s dilemma and denied that the chosen horn had the consequences that Flew

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Flew, ‘Theology and Falsification – A’, in Antony Flew & Alasdair Macintyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1955), pp. 96–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

seemed to think it had; and some tried to occupy a position somewhere between the two horns, denying that Flew had laid out all the options.

John Hick, for example, embraced the second horn of the dilemma, insisting that religious belief – and specifically belief in ‘the existence of ... a loving God’<sup>3</sup> – is unfalsifiable:

Would *any* conceivable happening compel the faithful to renounce their religious belief? ... [I]s there any *logical terminus*, any definite quantum of unfavourable evidence in face of which it would be demonstrably irrational to maintain theistic belief? It does not appear that there is or could be any such agreed limit. It seems, on the contrary, that theism is to this extent compatible with whatever may occur... It follows from this conclusion that theism is not an experimental issue.<sup>4</sup>

Hick denied, however, that the unfalsifiability of religious beliefs means that they lack informational content. At the other extreme, Randal Rauser insists that religious beliefs – including the belief that God loves us – are falsifiable, in ways similar to scientific beliefs:

[P]articular Christian beliefs are eminently falsifiable. That is, they could in principle be shown to be false ... [O]ne could provide evidence that God does not love anybody. Perhaps, for instance, we could argue that there is such a high distribution of evil in the world that it seems likely that God does not love any of his creatures ... [T]he belief that ‘God loves me’ is in principle as vulnerable to epistemic defeat as beliefs about the natural world.<sup>5</sup>

Rauser insists, however, that though belief in a good and loving God is falsifiable, it has not, in fact, been falsified. The final example I will note is that of Basil Mitchell, who seems to think that belief in a good and loving God somehow straddles both horns of the dilemma:

The theologian surely would not deny that the fact of pain counts against the assertion that God loves men. This very incompatibility generates the most intractable of theological problems – the problem of evil. So the theologian *does* recognize the fact of pain as counting against Christian doctrine. But it is true that he will not allow it – or anything – to count decisively against it; for he is committed by his faith to trust in God.<sup>6</sup>

Mitchell thereby hopes to gain the best of both worlds for the belief that God loves us – for he can take it both to attain informational content by being falsifiable to some degree, and to avoid actual falsification by his appeal to trust.

I take these three responses to be broadly representative of the range of positions available amongst mainstream analytic philosophers of religion, and I do not intend to discuss them in any detail, apart from to draw attention to a quality shared by all three. Namely, that however much they may disagree in their respective answers to Flew’s question, they are all, nonetheless, in complete agreement about there being only one correct answer. Though each of the philosophers quoted disagrees over *what* the logic of belief in a good and loving God is, they all agree that it has only one logic – that the logic of belief in a good and loving God is uniform. Consider how Hick asks ‘Would any conceivable happening compel the faithful to renounce their religious belief?’, and in doing so simply assumes that the same answer will apply to all of ‘the faithful’. Rauser talks of ‘the belief that ‘God loves me’ ’ in a way that makes it clear that he thinks that this belief comes in only one variety, and that logical properties can be ascribed to ‘the belief’ *simpliciter*. And Mitchell talks of what ‘[t]he theologian surely would not deny’ and what ‘the theologian *does* recognize’ – apparently taking it for granted that all theologians are in agreement over the nature of God’s love of humanity and the nature of people’s belief in that love. In their responses to Flew’s challenge each of these philosophers is taking it for granted that all instances of belief in a good and loving God are of one and the same kind.

The aim of this paper is to challenge this consensus by showing that belief in a good and loving God can come in multiple different logical varieties – ranging from being an evidentially grounded and empirically falsifiable ontological hypothesis, all the way to being a belief which is

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<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148 & 158.

<sup>5</sup> Randal Rauser, ‘How to show that ‘God loves me’ is false’, *The Tentative Apologist*, September 19<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Basil Mitchell, ‘Theology and Falsification – C’, in Antony Flew & Alasdair Macintyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1955), p. 103.

both non-groundable and non-falsifiable, and more akin to an attitude than to an hypothesis. The existence of multiple logical varieties of this belief is important to recognise, because failure to do so can lead to inadvertent misvaluations and inadvertent distortions. Misvaluation can come about because different logical varieties of the belief that there is a good and loving God may deserve different evaluations; but if someone is unaware that more than one variety of the belief exists, then he is likely to make illegitimately universal judgements – whether positive or negative. He might say, for example, that ‘the belief that there is a good and loving God is rational’ or ‘is irrational’ – unaware that there are varieties of the belief that he has not examined, but which are nonetheless included in his judgement. And distortion can come about because when such a person does come across a variety of the belief which is different from the variety that he takes to be the sole one, he is likely to try to assimilate the new belief – against the grain of its nature – to the only logic of the belief that he knows, thereby skewing it. This, in turn, will mean that he is likely to make misvaluations of specific instances of the belief as well as on the universal level. Thus if philosophy of religion is to engage in understanding and evaluating religious beliefs it is essential that it recognise that those beliefs often come in multiple logical varieties. I will show how this variety exists in the case of belief in a good and loving God, not only so as to correct generalisations – of the kind we saw just above – about this belief, but also with the hope that this will give the reader a feel for how common the phenomenon of logical variety may be in the family of religious beliefs more generally.

I will do this by putting forward a number of simple examples of belief in a good and loving God which can act as what Wittgenstein called ‘[c]entres of variation’<sup>7</sup> for the broad range of the varieties of this belief. Some of the examples will be taken from reports of actual people’s beliefs, some will be imaginary, and others will be hybrids of the two. These examples are not intended to be premises in, or evidence towards, any sort of argument for the existence of logical variety in the belief in question – such as an argument from the authority of the examples, or an argument from the number of examples collected. In fact, I am not trying to make an argument at all, in any usual sense. Rather, my intention is simply to lay out examples of different possible kinds of belief in a good and loving God – and in so doing to implicitly ask the reader: ‘Does this sound natural, or seem familiar, to you? Does this example ring true, as a form that this belief does actually take?’. None of the examples are intended to *force* the reader to admit anything – on pain of irrationality – as proofs and arguments are usually meant to do. Rather, the examples are intended to bring about a recognition in the reader – to provoke or prompt a recollection – that belief in a good and loving God really does come in a variety of logical kinds. I take this to be one aspect of the method that Wittgenstein is referring to when he says that ‘[l]earning philosophy is *really* recollecting. We remember that we really used words in this way’,<sup>8</sup> and therefore that ‘[t]he work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose’.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. First Centre of Variation: Beliefs in a Good and Loving God which are Empirically Falsifiable both with regard to Truth and with regard to Proof**

We can begin by considering some simple examples of beliefs in a good and loving God which are empirically falsifiable. Consider the following report from a 1983 study of religious parents’ responses to the early death of one of their children:

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<sup>7</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition* (Charlottesville, InteLex, 2003), item 157b, p. 13r; and Ludwig Wittgenstein & Rush Rhees, ‘Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Conversations with Rush Rhees (1939-50): from the notes of Rush Rhees’, ed. Gabriel Citron, *Mind*, 124/493 (2015), pp. 8 & 48.

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript: TS 213*, eds. & trans. C Grant Luckhardt & Maximilian AE Aue (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005), §89, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. GEM Anscombe (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999), part I, §127.

EXAMPLE 1: [O]ne woman explained: 'I turned away from (my beliefs) because I kept thinking, "How could there be a God?" ...' ... Often this type of ... [reaction] was described by those who had expected divine intervention to heal their children and were bitterly disappointed when the children died instead. As one father explained: 'I used to be a member of the church until after the death ... People had faith that Amy would live and it did not happen. So I changed my beliefs. Why believe in something that contradicts yourself?'<sup>10</sup>

The father in this passage had a belief in a good God which had very clear parameters. According to his belief, the existence of a good and loving God was incompatible with the early death of his daughter. So, when she did die – contrary to his expectation, and the expectation of some members of his church – he found this to 'contradict' his belief. In other words, his belief in a good and loving God was one which was falsifiable by a certain very specific empirical state of affairs, and indeed it was falsified when that state of affairs came about, so he dropped his belief in God. Consider, also, the following comments by a Jew who survived the Nazi concentration camps:

EXAMPLE 2: I lost my faith and stopped believing in God when I saw the Nazis take pious, innocent, bearded religious Jews out to the courtyard and butcher and slaughter them for sport, having competitions and playing games with these Jews as they murdered them for their amusement – like huntsmen sporting with animals – and leaving others, less pious than they, unharmed. How can you believe anything after you've seen something like that?<sup>11</sup>

For this man there was a specific state of affairs which he found to be incompatible with his belief in a good and loving God – namely, the injustice of the torture of the pious during the Nazi Holocaust, while the impious were left unharmed. This brought him to give up his belief as falsified by what he saw happening around him.

These examples of beliefs in a good and loving God are evidently falsifiable because their holders reported them to have been actually falsified by certain occurrences.<sup>12</sup> But a belief in a good and loving God can be falsifiable even though the believer does not take it to have been falsified. Consider, for example (EXAMPLE 3), the case of someone whose young daughter is in critical condition in hospital, after being run-over by a drunk driver. The father thinks to himself: 'If she dies, there cannot be a God – for God would never let such a child die so young, so pointlessly'. Or he may think to himself something like: 'If God lets her die, then He couldn't possibly exist'. Or perhaps: 'If she dies here, I couldn't possibly go on believing in God – but then I'll be left utterly bereft: without my daughter, and without my Father too' – and at that thought the distraught father may begin to pray even more fervently than before. In these cases, the believer envisages – and clearly articulates – a concrete state of affairs which he considers to be incompatible with the existence of a good and loving God. We may wonder that the death of his daughter should be, for him, a falsifying condition for his belief, given that countless men's daughters have died early and unjustly throughout history, and given that he surely knows this fact very well. We may wonder at this fact, but such it is: until this kind of tragedy faced him head-on, somehow it did not have the same power for him, and now that it is facing him, no other tragedy has any room in his mind.

It should be noted that a person may hold a falsifiable but unfalsified belief in a good and loving God – as in Example 3 – but without articulating, or even thinking of, the conditions that they would count as being falsifying. Perhaps they could be prompted to articulate those conditions by means of probing questions. Or perhaps they could be provoked to make conscious those conditions

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Cook & Dale W Wimberley, 'If I Should Die before I Wake: Religious Commitment and Adjustment to the Death of a Child', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 22/3 (1983), p. 227.

<sup>11</sup> Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York, The Free Press, 1980), p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the mere fact that someone ceases to believe in a good and loving God as a result of the obtaining of a certain empirical state of affairs does not by itself show that the belief in question must have been an empirically falsifiable one – for the empirical state of affairs may have been merely the *cause* of the person's ceasing to hold the belief. Rather, a belief will count as an empirically falsifiable one if the obtaining of an empirical state of affairs is the *reason why* the person gave up their belief, or the reason why they ought to. Thus it is significant that the father in Example 1 explicitly identified the unexpected death of his daughter as the reason why he stopped believing.

when confronted with the immanent possibility of one of the conditions' instantiation – such as with the father in Example 3. But it is possible that they never bring these conditions to consciousness at all, let alone articulate them. One's belief being falsifiable is a dispositional matter, and someone can have a disposition despite its never being manifested.<sup>13</sup>

The examples of beliefs presented in this section can be described as empirically falsifiable both with regard to truth and also with regard to proof. They are empirically falsifiable with regard to truth, in that for each of them there are describable empirical states of affairs the obtaining of which are taken to be incompatible with the truth of the beliefs in question; and they are empirically falsifiable with regard to proof, in that if those describable empirical states of affairs were to obtain, they would be easily identifiable and observable, and therefore able to be submitted as proof against the truth of the beliefs in question.

I take Examples 1, 2, and 3, to mark out one centre of logical variation for beliefs in a good and loving God. As with all the examples that I will present in the course of this paper, the question that readers must ask themselves is whether these examples ring true as ways that religious believers sometimes actually talk about and treat their beliefs in a good and loving God. If some of them do ring true then this should already make it clear that there is something seriously deficient in the descriptions of the logic of belief in a good and loving God given by both Hick and Mitchell in Section 1 – that 'theism is ... compatible with whatever may occur'<sup>14</sup> and that 'the theologian ... will not allow ... anything ... to count decisively against' the 'assertion that God loves men'.<sup>15</sup> These universal statements have completely ignored the kinds of belief in a good and loving God which we have seen exemplified in this section.

Let us now turn to some further examples of belief in a good and loving God – but examples whose logics seems slightly different to those of the beliefs just presented.

### **3. Second Centre of Variation: Beliefs in a Good and Loving God which are Empirically Falsifiable with regard to Truth, but not with regard to Proof**

Consider the following remarks from a sermon given – in 1912 – by the then popular American preacher, James Russell Miller (1840–1912):

EXAMPLE 4: Sometimes there is *inscrutable mystery* in the difficult experiences through which godly people are led. A few years ago a happy young couple came from the marriage altar, full of hope and joy ... A year later a baby came and was welcomed with great gladness. From the beginning, however, the little one was a sufferer. She was taken to one of the best physicians in the land. After careful examination, his decision was that her condition is absolutely hopeless ... What comfort can we give to such mothers as this? Yes, it is hard to look upon the child's condition, so pathetic, so pitiful, and to remember the doctor's words: 'Absolutely hopeless!' Is there any comfort for this condition? Can this mother say that God is leading her in the path of life? Is this experience of suffering, part of that path? Does God *know* about the long struggle of this mother? Does he know what the doctor said? Yes – he knows all. Has he then no *power* to do anything? Yes – he has all power. Why, then, does he not cure this child? We may not try to answer. We do not know God's reasons. Yet we know it is all right. What good can possibly come from this child's condition, and from the continuation of this painful condition year after year? We do not know. Perhaps it is for the sake of the mother and father, who are being led through these years of anguish, disappointment and sorrow. Many people suffer *for the sake of others*, and we know at least that these parents are receiving a training in unselfishness, in gentleness, in patience, in trust. ... Let us never be afraid, however great our sufferings, however dark life is. Let us go on in faith and love, never doubting, not even asking *why*, bearing our pain and learning to sing while we suffer. God is watching, and he will bring good and beauty out of all our suffering.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This also applies to the other varieties of the belief that we will see in the succeeding sections.

<sup>14</sup> Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, pp. 148 & 158.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, 'Theology and Falsification', p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> JR Miller, 'You Will Not Mind the Roughness', *Grace Gems*.

Miller's sermon deals with what is almost the paradigmatic prima facie falsifier of belief in a good and loving God – the suffering of an innocent child. Miller 'defuses' this prima facie falsifier, however, by insisting that God will 'bring good and beauty out of all our suffering'. In other words, God is morally justified in allowing or causing the suffering in question because He is only doing so in order to bring about from it an outweighing good. Miller even suggests one possibility of a good that God may have intended by the child's suffering: 'Perhaps it is for the sake of the mother and father, who ... are receiving a training in unselfishness, in gentleness, in patience, in trust.' However, Miller is very clear that this is just one possibility, and that in fact, we are in no position to know what good God intends to bring from any given suffering. If the parents buckle under the stress of caring for their sick child, and their marriage falls apart with recriminations and bitterness, Miller would simply insist that we are not in a position to know what goods will sprout, perhaps in some distant way, at some distant time, from the tragedy of the child and that of his parents' marriage – but we should have faith that some worthwhile good certainly will result. The kind of goods that Miller believes God will bring to flourish from sufferings are all perfectly intelligible and describable causal consequences of the evils in question – it is just that, given the complexity of the goods that God can bring from given evils, and given our limited capacities, we will never be in a position to be able to identify whether or not they have come about. Thus Miller has put forward a defuser of the prima facie falsifier of the child's suffering – but his defuser is such that it is not itself easily falsified.

The defuser appealed to in this kind of belief need not only be that the prima facie falsifier will allow for an outweighing good of some sort, but could equally well be that it might allow for the avoidance of a significantly greater evil. Consider the following summary of the responses of some religious parents who had been bereaved of children:

EXAMPLE 5: Parents who spoke of religion and their beliefs ... also spoke of God having some reason for their child's death ... A few parents suggested their child may have had some sort of abnormality and they had to trust that God knew best: 'I accepted that God knew there was something wrong and that's why she had died. And He knew that, whatever was wrong, we couldn't handle it, between ourselves, that it was His will.'<sup>17</sup>

The kinds of evil that the parent may think their child's death avoided could all have been easily imaginable and describable. However, we would never be in a position to confirm whether or not one or other of these maladies really lay in the child's future – for the wrong could have been some subtle physical disease, and it could equally have been an undetectable latent moral disorder, or spiritual sickness.

The kind of defusers that we have seen used in the above two examples can be applied very broadly to all evils – taking evils universally to happen either so as to causally bring about outweighing goods or to effect the avoidance of greater evils. If we asked a believer (EXAMPLE 6) who appeals to such defusers whether or not there is a state of affairs which he would take to falsify – to be inconsistent with – the existence of a good and loving God, he might reply: 'Of course there is! – Namely, a state of affairs in which there was suffering which did not allow for any outweighing good or for the avoidance of any greater evil. That is, if there were suffering which was pointless. And it is not hard to imagine a case of such suffering – such as a person dying young, when, on the one hand, he would actually have gone on to have had a wonderful life, bringing joy to all around him, and where his death, on the other hand, does not lead to any material, moral, or spiritual growth by any others. Such random and meaningless suffering would be completely incompatible with the existence of a good and loving God – but we humans can never be in a position to identify any suffering as being meaningless in that way, because we can never see the whole picture. And this is precisely what it means to have *faith* in God: to trust in Him, that He is there, guiding everything around us for the best, even when that cannot be seen.'

How, then, do the logics of the beliefs exemplified in this section compare with those of the beliefs exemplified in the previous section? The beliefs in the previous section were empirically

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<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Gilbert, 'Religion as a Resource for Bereaved Parents', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 31/1 (1992), pp. 22–3.

falsifiable both with regard to truth and proof, whereas the beliefs of this section are empirically falsifiable with regard to truth but not with regard to proof. For though there are describable empirical states of affairs the obtaining of which are taken to be incompatible with the truth of this section's beliefs, those states of affairs could never be *shown* to obtain. There are therefore some similarities between the beliefs of this section and previous one, but also so significant differences.

#### **4. Third Centre of Variation: Beliefs in a Good and Loving God which are not Empirically Falsifiable, but which are Philosophically Falsifiable**

There is yet another form that belief in a good and loving God can take – but which is not empirically falsifiable at all. Believers whose beliefs are of this third variety acknowledge that there are many *prima facie* falsifiers of their belief in a good and loving God, but they defuse these falsifiers by claiming that all evils bear a necessary relation to certain goods which outweigh them, which provide an explanation (or a possible explanation) for why a good and loving God would allow the evils to happen. Richard Swinburne's belief in a good and loving God seems to be of this kind:

EXAMPLE 7: [T]he good of individual humans (and in so far as they are capable thereof, the good of animals) consists (as well as in their having thrills of pleasure) in their having free will to choose between good and evil, the ability to develop their own characters and those of their fellows, to show courage and loyalty, to love, to be of use, to contemplate beauty and discover truth – and if there is a God it consists above all in voluntary service and adoration of him in the company of one's fellows, for ever and ever. All that ... cannot be achieved without quite a bit of suffering on the way ... [O]f each ... [moral and natural evil] it is the case that by allowing it to occur God makes possible a good which he could not otherwise make possible without allowing it (or an equally bad state) to occur. Every moral evil in the world is such that God allowing it to occur makes possible (given the assumption that humans have free will) the great good of a particular choice between good and bad. Every bad desire facilitates such a choice. Every false belief makes possible the great good of investigation, especially cooperative investigation, and the great good of some of us helping others towards the truth. Every pain makes possible a courageous response (in all except animals caused to respond badly, and humans who do not yet realize what is the good response), and normally the goods of compassion and sympathetic action. And those animal pains to which animals are caused to respond badly, and those human pains to which humans respond with self-pity in ignorance of what a good thing a courageous response would be, still provide many opportunities and much knowledge for others. We can respond to the self-pitying humans by helping them to do better; their failure is our opportunity. And all animal pain gives knowledge and opportunity for compassion to animals and humans if they know of it ... Each bad state or possible bad state removed takes away *one* actual good. Each small addition to the number of actual or possible bad states makes a small addition to the number of actual or possible good states.<sup>18</sup>

According to Swinburne the evils in the world are the necessarily possible side-effects of the existence of free will, and the value of the existence of free will outweighs the evil which stems from it; and furthermore, sometimes evils are themselves necessary conditions for the opportunity for moral and spiritual character development, and the value of this opportunity outweighs the evils which are necessary for it. We must note that Swinburne's defuser is not the fact that people *actually do* a certain minimal amount of good as a result of their free will, or that they *actually develop* their moral and spiritual characters to a certain minimal degree as a result of the evils that challenge them. If this was his defuser then it would itself be open to empirical falsification – namely, by a preponderance of immoral uses of our freedom, and a preponderance of selfish and cowardly responses to our own and others' suffering. But Swinburne's defuser does not commit him to any empirical states at all, for his defuser relies on the value of the mere existence of free will and of the mere existence of the opportunity for moral and spiritual character development – and not on whether that freedom or opportunity are used well or badly. Thus, whatever happens in the world, Swinburne will not take his belief in a good and loving God to have been falsified – for he thinks that

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. xii & 217–18.

all evils can be accounted for by their necessary relation to the values of free will and opportunity for moral and spiritual growth.

However, the fact that Swinburne's belief is not empirically falsifiable, does not mean that it is utterly unfalsifiable – for it relies on the truth of all manner of contested philosophical positions, and these positions could perhaps be shown to be false by philosophical proof and argument. One of philosophical premises on which Swinburne's defusers depend is his set of axiological judgements regarding various relative value-weightings; another is his moral judgement regarding whether it is permissible for an agent to inflict suffering on one being for the benefit of another. Swinburne, in fact, explicitly acknowledges that his defusers 'will only convince fully those readers who come to accept many of the moral views [which I have] advocated ... about which actions and states of affairs are good'.<sup>19</sup> Swinburne can hold that his philosophical judgements are not false, but are nonetheless philosophically falsifiable. Holding a philosophical position in a falsifiable manner may involve being able to state clearly which other philosophical positions would be incompatible with one's own; and perhaps even more than that, being able to explain what kind of arguments could be made in order to convince one of one of those incompatible philosophical truths. Thus, Swinburne could acknowledge that a strong deontological ethics – which held that killing others was always forbidden, no matter what good end one hopes to achieve thereby – would be incompatible with his defuser. He may even be able to point to precisely how a Kantian argument would need to be bolstered in order to convince him of the truth of that deontological principle. He believes that the argument cannot be bolstered in the necessary ways, but he is open to being shown otherwise. Thus, though his belief in a good and loving God is not open to empirical falsification of any sort – either with regard to truth or with regard to proof – it is nonetheless open to falsification of some sort, namely, philosophical falsification.

## 5. Fourth Centre of Variation: Beliefs in a Good and Loving God which are Non-Falsifiable

The final cluster of examples that I will bring, is of beliefs in a good and loving God which seem to be of a radically different kind to any of the preceding. Consider the following passage from a sermon given by Rabbi Shimon Schwab (1908–1995) who managed to escape Nazi Germany for America in the 1930s:

EXAMPLE 8: There are so many who ask the question 'Why?' There's no doubt that all the troubles which befall the Jewish people, are by no means accidental. They are punishments for our historic sins, such as assimilation, beginning in ancient times and continuing through our most recent past. However, this does not explain the massive holocaust which was allowed by the Holy One (blessed be He) to take place. We do not dare give any explanations, nor do we even search for answers. We do not ask the questions that so many ask: How come so many righteous ones, holy ones, and pure ones were choked to death in gas chambers? What was the sin of one million Jewish children who were murdered in cold blood? Why were all those millions of innocent Jews by virtue of their ignorance – slaughtered like sheep? As to the masses of Torah Jews, they all did repentance, and they all were already purified by their sufferings. How come the prayers of those righteous ones and holy ones and all those thousands of penitents were not answered? And on the other hand, many non-believers – violators of the Torah – were saved. The answer is: silence! We do not dare ask.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that Rabbi Schwab is deeply troubled by the suffering, destruction, and injustice of the Holocaust. However, he does not allow those things to actually bring any falsifying force to bear on his belief in a good and loving God. He says that 'We do not ask the questions that so many ask', rather, when the question is raised we say: '[S]ilence!'. Thus, he recommends that – despite the seeming falsifying force of the Holocaust – we nonetheless retain our belief in a good and loving

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Chaim Rapoport, *The Messiah problem: Berger, The Angel, and the Scandal of Reckless Indiscrimination* (Ilford, Ilford Synagogue, 2002), p. 171 fn (I have silently translated Hebrew words into English, and taken out some italicisations).



God. No attempt is made to defuse the falsifying force of the Holocaust for belief in a good and loving God, rather, its falsifying force is simply shut down or refused. Rabbi Schwab considers it to be irreligious or impious to even try to consider how it could be that a good and loving God could allow the Holocaust, and instead of trying to *understand* the compatibility of a good and loving God and the Holocaust we are forcefully exhorted to simply *accept* their compatibility.

This approach is exemplified even more forcefully in a sermon of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889–1943), which he preached to his fellow prisoners, from the depths of the Warsaw Ghetto, in December 1941:

EXAMPLE 9: [O]ne's faith must ... involve an act of self-surrender ... Now when [the notion of] self-surrender is applied to the context of faith, the meaning is this: even at a time when God's presence is hidden, one believes in Him; one believes that everything comes from Him, everything is good, everything is just, and all the sufferings are full of God's love for Israel. To our sorrow, we see now that even among those people who had been firm believers, certain individuals have had their faith weakened. They pose questions, saying in effect, 'Why have You forsaken us? If the suffering is being inflicted upon us in order to bring us closer to Torah and divine service, [why do] we see the opposite happening?! The Torah and everything sacred are being destroyed.' Now if the Jewish person speaks this way as an expression of prayer and supplication, as he pours out his heart before God, that is good. But if, God forbid, he is posing questions; or even if he is not [actively] questioning, but, in the depths of his heart, his faith, God forbid, is weakened, then God help us! Faith is the foundation of everything; when one's faith is, God forbid, weakened, then, God forbid, he is torn away and separated from Him... In reality, however, what place is there for arguments, God forbid, and questions? ... [O]ne must surrender his soul, his self, his attachments. Then his faith will not be weakened; he will believe with perfect faith that everything is [transpiring] with justice and with the love of God for Israel.<sup>21</sup>

According to Rabbi Shapira there are sufferings which are so great – and so purely destructive – that no reason or explanation could possibly be given for them which would accommodate them within the system of our beliefs about God and His workings. No answers can be given, no defusers can be provided – but we must bind ourselves to God nonetheless, with a faith that is above reason and rationality. Even to go so far as to 'pose questions' in one's heart about God's justice is to manifest a blasphemous impairment of faith, and to 'tear oneself away' from God. In short, arguments or questions on the matter are ruled out as religiously and spiritually suicidal. Indeed, in serving God we must submit not only our wills to Him, but our whole selves, including our reason – thus we overcome any falsifying power of the suffering around us by an act of faithful surrender to God despite that suffering. If we do that then we see that everything – even the worst torture and suffering – 'is [transpiring] with justice and with the love of God for Israel'. Thus, Rabbi Shapira advocates a belief in a good and loving God which is utterly non-falsifiable, which sets itself in the face of even the most radical apparently falsifying evidence. It seems that for Rabbi Schwab and Rabbi Shapira, the whole issue of falsifiability is taken to be entirely inappropriate to their belief in a good and loving God.

I would like to bring one further examples in this section, because they will show that it is possible for utterly non-falsifiable beliefs to nonetheless look a lot like beliefs that are falsifiable. Consider the following remarks by Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, who was briefly interned at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from which he escaped and fled to Britain, but whose brother was killed in the Holocaust:

EXAMPLE 10: There is no experience, either without or within, that can possibly destroy religious faith. Good fortune without reveals the hand of God; bad fortune, if it is not a matter of just punishment, teaches that God's ways are unintelligible, not that there are no ways of God.<sup>22</sup>

The believers exemplified in Section 3 thought they could describe and outline the kinds of reasons that God might have for allowing or causing evil – they did not think that God's reasons were

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<sup>21</sup> Sermon of December 15<sup>th</sup> 1941, quoted in Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 82–4.

<sup>22</sup> Emil Fackenheim, 'On the Eclipse of God', in Emil L Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1968), p. 231.

unintelligible or unfathomable, rather they just thought that we humans are not in a position to know which of the reasons suggested was actually God's reason on a particular occasion. Rabbi Fackenheim speaks similarly of God having reasons for allowing or causing evils – but he adds the caveat that these reasons are not merely beyond our ability to *know*, but rather, completely beyond human capacity even to *comprehend*.

As with all the falsifiable varieties of the belief, Rabbi Fackenheim may even say that there are states of affairs which would be incompatible with the truth of his belief in a good and loving God. Namely, if all the suffering and evil of this world took place – but without there being any reason for it. This is almost identical to what the believer in Example 6 said. But in this case, the same words are being used with a different grammar. For the believer in Example 6 could describe the kind of thing that he meant by such phrases as 'suffering with no reason behind it' – namely, suffering which was not causally related in the right way to outweighing goods or greater evils. But Rabbi Fackenheim could not say anything at all about what is covered by 'suffering with no reason behind it' – for when he talks of God's reasons he adds the caveat that these reasons are completely unintelligible to the human mind. But if the kinds of thing that might count as reasons for suffering are utterly beyond our understanding and imagination, so too must be the kinds of situation that would count as being *lacking* in reasons. Rabbi Fackenheim could not describe – in anything other than the most formal terms – a state of affairs (be it empirical, philosophical, or of any sort) that would be incompatible with the truth of his belief, let alone, any state of affairs which could be identified and observed to obtain. Thus, when we scratch the surface of the kind of belief presented in Example 10, we find that though it is expressed in ways that makes it sound quite similar to certain falsifiable forms of the belief in a good and loving God, to all intents and purposes, it is actually entirely non-falsifiable.

If the cluster of examples set out in this section ring true as ways that religious believers sometimes actually talk about and treat their beliefs in a good and loving God, then this will have made clear that there is a logical variety of this belief which is entirely non-falsifiable – non-falsifiable both empirically and philosophically, and both with regard to truth and proof. This shows that there is something seriously deficient in Rauser's remarks – quoted in Section 1 – that 'the belief that 'God loves me' is in principle as vulnerable to epistemic defeat as beliefs about the natural world'.<sup>23</sup> This universal statement has completely ignored the kinds of belief in a good and loving God which we have seen exemplified in this section.

Furthermore, just as it is possible for people to have an empirically falsifiable belief in a good and loving God without having consciously articulated to themselves what exactly they would take to falsify the belief, so too it is possible to have an entirely non-falsifiable belief in a good and loving God without having brought the fact of its non-falsifiability to consciousness – for as I said in Section 2, whether or not a believer holds his belief falsifiably is largely a matter of his dispositions.

That said, it should be noted that in all the examples set out above, the element of non-falsifiability was very much present and conscious to the believers who expressed their beliefs. More than that, these believers often explicitly took the difference between falsifiable and non-falsifiable varieties of belief in a good and loving God to be one laden with religious significance – for according to the believers quoted in this section, holding a belief in God's goodness and love which is falsifiable is actually blasphemous, or, at the very least, something sinfully hubristic or a terrible weakening of one's faith. Thus, the distinction between empirically falsifiable and entirely non-falsifiable varieties of belief in a good and loving God is not merely a neutral one which is helpful for philosophical housekeeping, but rather one of enormous *religious* significance. In fact, religious communities have to hand an array of pejorative descriptions for disapproved-of forms of given religious beliefs – such as 'primitive', 'childish', or even 'superstitious', 'unorthodox', 'heretical', or 'idolatrous'. It turns out that making distinctions between different varieties of a given belief is actually a very common practice within religions.

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<sup>23</sup> Rauser, 'How to Show'.

## 6. The Nature and Significance of the Differences between the above Centres of Variation

The beliefs in the four clusters of examples arrayed above in Sections 2–5 differ with regard to their degree and kind of falsifiability, up to an including beliefs that are entirely non-falsifiable. As Wittgenstein says, '[i]f someone says he believes something then we can't always tell what he believes merely from the words he uses... It is so often a matter of finding what things are connected with what he says.'<sup>24</sup> To say that one belief differs from another with regards to its degree and kind of falsifiability is simply to point out one way in which different 'things are connected with' each of the two beliefs. Insofar as the degree and kind of falsifiability of a given belief is a part of its logic, the beliefs of the four clusters of examples arrayed above differ in their logics. How significant these logical differences are taken to be will be a function of how significant the differences with regard to degree and kind of falsifiability are taken to be.

As it happens, the difference between a belief that is observably empirically falsifiable and one that is entirely non-falsifiable is one that is usually very significant to us. For example, a belief that is observably empirically falsifiable can be used to predict the obtaining or non-obtaining of certain observable empirical states of affairs, whereas an entirely non-falsifiable belief cannot ground any such predictions. Moreover, an observably empirically falsifiable belief can be contradicted by the obtaining or non-obtaining of observable states of affairs, and therefore found to be false, whereas an entirely non-falsifiable belief cannot be found to be false in any such way. Furthermore, observably empirically falsifiable beliefs directly connect to, and interact with, a whole host of other beliefs that we have – namely, our other empirical beliefs about the world, what makes it up, and what happens in it – in ways which entirely non-falsifiable beliefs do not. Since these matters of proof and evidence, predictive power, truth and falsity, consistency of belief, and the like play significant roles in our lives, the logical difference between observably empirically falsifiable beliefs and entirely non-falsifiable ones is a significant one. Thus, talk of falsifiability or non-falsifiability is really shorthand for an interlocking web of qualities which are usually fundamental to the logic of our beliefs. Falsifiability is not a logical quality that belongs narrowly or especially to beliefs of the natural sciences; rather, it speaks much more broadly to the issues of the extent to which a belief is sensitive to reality, and the kind of reality it is sensitive to (empirical, scientific, metaphysical, etc., or none at all).<sup>25</sup> Thus, if both some of the beliefs exemplified in Section 2 (observably empirically falsifiable ones) and some of those exemplified in Section 5 (entirely non-falsifiable ones), were recognised by the reader as being kinds of belief actually held by some religious believers, then it will have been recognised that belief in a good and loving God comes in more than one logical variety.

By saying that the beliefs exemplified in Section 2 and in Section 5 are of different logical varieties I am saying nothing more than that their logics are different in significant ways. Because significance is interest-relative, the matter of categorising beliefs in a good and loving God in logically fine-grained ways will always be open to disagreement. I have placed two distinct logical categories between those of observably empirically falsifiable beliefs and entirely non-falsifiable ones – namely, those of Sections 3 and 4. But if one wanted to deny that the differences between those two intermediate clusters were significant enough to warrant their being counted as a distinct logical varieties, this would be fine – as long as the logical differences between them were noted and

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<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Wittgenstein's Saturday Discussions: 1946-1947', in Ludwig Wittgenstein, eds. & trans. James C Klagge & Alfred Nordmann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 404.

<sup>25</sup> Thus I could just as well have shown the logical variety amongst beliefs in a good and loving God by focussing on other logical qualities, such as for example, the given beliefs' degree of groundedness or non-groundedness in evidence, and the kinds of evidence involved. Falsifiability or otherwise is a convenient and dramatic way of looking at the logical differences between beliefs, but it is by no means the only one.

not glided over. As Wittgenstein says in a slightly different context: 'Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts.'<sup>26</sup>

Now, it might be objected to the above that one cannot necessarily learn about the content of a belief from its ramifications, and therefore that one cannot say that one belief has a different logic from another just because it implies or is implied by different kinds of thing. Simple reflection, however, will show that this objection must be misguided. For whether or not a belief implies that one's child will survive his illness, or whether or not it implies that certain kinds of good must eventually come about, will be a matter of the content of the belief in question. The content of a belief and its inferential ramifications are internally related – they are mutually constitutive of one another.

A second, more promising objection, grants that the content of a belief is internally related to its degree and kind of falsifiability. What it calls into doubt is that the degree and kind of falsifiability that a believer takes his own belief to have – and treats it as having – is necessarily an accurate reflection of the degree and kind of falsifiability that the belief *actually* has. The basis for this objection is the recognition that a believer can be mistaken or confused about the logic of the belief that he holds. For example, a believer in a good and loving God could take his belief to be observably empirically falsifiable simply because the various possible philosophical defusers of those prima facie empirical falsifiers have never occurred to him. Thus, he takes his belief to be – and treats it as being – observably empirically falsifiable, when in actual fact it is only philosophically falsifiable. This is indeed a good observation, and I would not want to deny that people can sometimes be mistaken or confused about the logic of their own beliefs – and therefore treat them in a way that is not fitting for that belief and in a way which therefore does not inform us accurately about the belief.

However, though such mistakes or confusions are possible, this fact cannot be used to deny that there are multiple logical varieties of belief in a good and loving God. For though a person can sometimes be mistaken or confused about the logic of his own belief, there are plenty of cases in which it would be very unreasonable to claim this. Consider someone who is suspected of being mistaken or confused about the logic of his belief. Imagine that the person who suspects the believer of being mistaken or confused proceeds to explain to the believer the alternative logic that the former takes to be the correct one for the believer's belief, and the believer shows that he clearly understands this alternative logic. For example, a person who takes his belief in a good and loving God to be observably empirically falsifiable may be suspected of simply not having realised that his belief is actually only philosophically falsifiable, because he has not realised that all prima facie empirical falsifiers can be defused by means of a good philosophical theodicy. The believer who has this explained to him, and who understands it clearly, may react in one of two ways. He may be grateful and admit that he hadn't thought of that, and that it therefore turns out that in actual fact his belief is not, and never was, observably empirically falsifiable at all. However, another believer may fully understand the form of the belief that is only philosophically falsifiable, and deny that this is his belief. This believer may insist that his belief is one that is observably empirically falsifiable – for if God really is a good Father then there are certain obvious and observable things that He simply will not allow. The believer may add that if anyone denies this, then clearly they must mean by 'good and loving' something quite different to what he, the believer, means. If this is the believer's reaction, then it would seem difficult to claim that this may be a case in which he is mistaken or confused about the logic of his belief. After all, if a person fully understands a given variety of a belief, then his honest denial that this is the variety of the belief that he holds, will itself be partly constitutive of the fact that the belief he holds is not of that logical variety.<sup>27</sup> There is a degree of

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<sup>26</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, part I, §79.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Garrett Millikan, in a different context, observes that "there is ... a tendency for the object of one's thought to become whatever one takes it to be" ('On Unclear and Indistinct Ideas', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8 (1994), p. 75). Similarly, there is a tendency for the logic of one's belief to become – at least partially – whatever one takes it to be.

radical misunderstanding of a belief which it does not make sense to attribute to a person. For at a certain point it makes no sense to attribute to someone a belief of a variety which they completely and utterly misunderstand, and it makes sense, instead, to admit that they actually understand their belief perfectly well, only that they hold a different variety of the belief to the one that we initially thought they held.

We can therefore imagine each of the believers of the above examples being confronted clearly with the logics of the alternative varieties of the belief, and being asked if, perhaps, they might not be mistaken about the nature of their belief. We can imagine cases in which the believers might agree that they were mistaken, but we can equally imagine cases in which they would not admit to any such mistake or confusion. And since this reaction is perfectly intelligible, the objection that the way a believer treats his belief may be out of sync with its true logic does not threaten to collapse the multiple different varieties that I have laid out above into only one.

The above reasoning applies to distinctions between logical varieties of any degree of fine- or course-grainedness. But when it comes to logical varieties which are radically different – such as the difference between observably empirically falsifiable beliefs and entirely non-falsifiable ones – the idea that a person could hold a belief of one of these kinds but mistakenly treat it as though it were of the other, becomes extremely hard to understand. With Wittgenstein, we might want to say that '[f]or a blunder, that's too big'.<sup>28</sup> This means that at the very least the fact that some believers treat their belief in a good and loving God as observably empirically falsifiable, and others treat theirs as entirely non-falsifiable, should show that there is more than one logical variety of the belief.

## 7. Conclusion and Further Directions

The aim of this paper has been to show that belief in a good and loving God is not logically uniform, but rather, that it can and does come in multiple logical varieties. Analytic philosophy of religion seems often to work on the assumption that all religious beliefs are logically uniform (that is, that all instances of belief in God are of the same logical kind as each other, and all instances of belief in the afterlife are of the same logical kind as each other, and the like). The most effective way to undermine this presumption of uniformity is to present examples of a range of different logical varieties of a given belief and simply to ask: 'But do not religious believers also hold beliefs like this?'. I hope that in working through the range of examples arrayed above the reader will not just get a sense of the logical varieties of belief in a good and loving God, but also a sense of how easy it would be to lay out a similar range of logically varied examples for other core religious beliefs – such as belief in miracles, in God's creation of the world, in the efficacy of petitionary prayer, in the afterlife, and many more.

It is important to recognise the existence of logical variety in religious beliefs – as I mentioned in the Introduction – because failure to do so often leads both to misevaluations and to distortions of the beliefs in question. Therefore, since philosophers of religion spend so much of their time trying to provide elucidations or evaluations of religious beliefs, the recognition of the logical variety of many religious beliefs ought to be fundamental to much of what philosophers of religion do.

However, more than simply helping us to avoid misevaluating and distorting religious beliefs, recognising the existence of logical variety is also important for a further reason – for logical variety is the foundation upon which further important logical qualities rest, so that failure to recognise logical variety will almost certainly lead to failure to recognise these second-level qualities as well. Thus, the logical variety exhibited by the belief in a good and loving God often gives rise, in turn, to

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<sup>28</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Lectures on Religious Belief', in Ludwig Wittgenstein, ed. Cyril Barrett, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief: compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1966), p. 62.

people holding that belief in a way that is indeterminate, mixed, or fluid between those different varieties. That is, someone's belief in a good and loving God may hover indeterminately between more than one logical variety of the belief; or it may mix together some of the logical characteristics of different varieties of the belief; or it may change from having one logical character to another and perhaps back again. The fact that people's religious beliefs are often logically indeterminate, mixed, or fluid, will be masked by the fact that the belief is always expressed by the same sentence regardless; and yet, these logical qualities are very common amongst religious beliefs, and account for much of the real-life complexity and messiness that is characteristic of religious beliefs as actually held.

Sometimes, of course, indeterminacy, mixedness, and fluidity will be manifestations of doxastic vices, such as confusion or evasion on the part of the believer. At other times, however, they can constitute doxastic virtues of positive religious significance. For example, certain kinds of indeterminacy and mixedness can be the result of the multi-layered nature of some religious beliefs; and certain kinds of fluidity can be manifestations of processes of religious growth or of a natural ebb and flow in religious life. There is no room here to enter into a full discussion of the nature and significance of the qualities of logical indeterminacy, mixedness, and fluidity, in religious belief. But I hope that in highlighting the logical variety that exists in one central religious belief, I have not only brought attention to that variety itself, but also helped to lay some groundwork for a more detailed study of the important logical qualities that derive from it<sup>29,30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> I have made a brief start in discussing the qualities of logical indeterminacy, mixedness, and fluidity, in my paper 'Simple Objects of Comparison for Complex Grammars: An Alternative Strand in Wittgenstein's Later Remarks on Religion', *Philosophical Investigations*, 35/1 (2012), especially sections 3 & 5; and, with some overlap, I also touch on them in my paper 'Religious Language as Paradigmatic of Language in General: Wittgenstein's 1933 Lectures', in Nuno Venturinha (ed.), *The Textual Genesis of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (London, Routledge, 2013), especially section 5.

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