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BELIEF, PRACTICE, AND GRAMMATICAL UNDERSTANDING

John H. Whittaker

This essay develops the point that *beliefs* as well as concepts bear an essential relation to the practices in which their grammar is expressed. Those beliefs that Wittgenstein called "certainties" are the best example, since our acceptance of them as such is ingredient in our acquired capacities for thinking and judging as we do. But a similar connection between belief and behavior can be found in beliefs, especially religious beliefs, that are not incumbent on us as reasonable people. Their force belongs to the *kind* of belief that they are, but we implicitly attend to a similar kind of grammatical force when we recognize any kind of belief. It is part of the logic that governs our understanding of beliefs and explains why one must comply with a religious belief in order to affirm it at all.

In this paper I want to explore the contentious and often misunderstood claim of Wittgenstein that the understanding of language is internally related to participation in a practice. I want to defend not only the idea that the understanding of concepts depends on a grasp of their use in an activity; but more importantly, I want to point out that this same normative connection between language and practice is important in the understanding of beliefs. My eventual focus will be the question of whether or not beliefs have a grammar that governs the understanding of not only the beliefs themselves, but also of what it means to think of them as true. Clarity on this point will aid us in our understanding of beliefs in general, but particularly in our understanding of religious beliefs. First, though, we need to make sure that we have a common understanding of what grammatical understanding is.

I

Understanding for Wittgenstein was a capacity. It was the capacity to use words in accordance with the unwritten norms that are to be found in meaningful speech. Grammar, in fact, simply <u>is</u> the set of norms by which we distinguish between sensible and senseless uses of a term; e.g., when we say that it is meaningless to ask where history is located. How do we know that such remarks are meaningless? Because they rub against our intuitions? No doubt; but Wittgenstein suggests that these intuitions reflect learned patterns that tell us what does and does not make sense in talking

about history. These patterns are constitutive of the grammar that governs the meaningfulness of our discourse, enabling us to distinguish sense from nonsense in our speech and telling us what is conceptually imaginable in contrast to what is senseless. The various strictures that grammar places on meaning, however, are too elusive to be written down as a set of rules; and even if they could be written down, they would require their own unwritten rules for their application — which is to say that the written rules would require their own unwritten grammar. Much of the *Philosophical Investigations* is concerned with this point, and Wittgensteins discussion of the matter will not be repeated here. For now, we can simply say that to have mastered the grammar of the use of a term is to understand a concept. In understanding a concept, we depend on something that resembles the knowing-how of observing norms, since this mastery enables us to go on speaking grammatical sense in a variety of contexts.

Before going any further, though, one particular point should be mentioned, since it is the source of a common form of misunderstanding. Many think that Wittgenstein held the view that grammar, or the normative connection between language and practice, applies only to *discrete* activities — that is, only to language-games or forms of life. According to this conception, language-games and/or forms of life are activities that can be isolated from one another in the absence of any particular conceptual focus. Thus, the speaking that goes on in these discrete spheres of activity belongs to a grammar that is unintelligible to those who do not participate in this activity. The discourse that is internal to one of sphere of activity cannot be criticized from point of view internal to another. This, though, is far too simplistic. Wittgenstein used the language-game analogy only in an *ad hoc* way that depended on the particular conceptual points at issue. As our conceptual interest shifts from one term to another, or from one sense of a term to another, so too do the "games" in which we locate the use of the relevant terms. Thus, one way of distinguishing between one language-game and another might not be useful for making another grammatical point. Given the change in the conceptual issues at stake, a completely new way of distinguishing between "games" might need to be drawn. In short, there is no such thing as a language-game *simpliciter*. The distinction is relative to the particular conceptual headaches that Wittgenstein tried to alleviate.[1]

To put the point in another way, the distinctions drawn to clarify the difference between one use of a term and another presume a specific conceptual focus. Apart from this focus, the point of distinguishing between one grammatical context and another is lost. As William Hyde puts it, "Those who accuse Wittgenstein of compartmentalization are wrongly inferring, from that fact that something can be distinguished (for whatever purpose) from other surrounding things, that something is isolated and cut off from these other things — as if the distinguishability of the heart from the aorta made the heart isolated and cut off from the aorta."[2] D. Z. Phillips has made similar points at greater length in *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, where he points out that the use of a term in one activity — supposedly a different language-game — is parasitic on its use in another and thus might, from another point of view, be considered part of the same game.[3]

Recently James Conant called attention to another distinction that is rel-

evant here. Wittgenstein said that language-games are all right as they stand, and this might suggest, if our practices are compounded of various language-games, that these practices lie beyond the possibility of meaningful criticism. But this obviously does not follow, if only because words that can be used correctly — i.e., in accordance with the grammar illustrated by a language-game — can also be used incorrectly. In other words, both the use and the misuse of words belongs to what one might call our practice, but the misuse of words, unlike the meaningful use of terms, has no connection with *normative* usage. It is mere practice, not the normative practice of meaningful speaking, and so there is nothing to stop such practices from being criticized in a variety of ways. In effect, that was what Wittgenstein himself was doing when he challenged the sense of much of the discourse that passes for philosophical reflection; practicing *that* sort of discourse is pointless, being bereft of the grammatical norms that give the relevant terms their sense.   Such practice is language "gone on holiday."

The grammatical practice that the language-game analogy is designed to illustrate is a particular *kind* of practice, the kind that enables the norms that govern meaningful speech to be learned. But this kind of practice is always surrounded by a larger context of activity that is disconnected to the particular issues of conceptual understanding at hand, whatever they might be. This surrounding practice consists simply of whatever goes on, whereas grammatical practice (a Alanguage-game) always illustrates particular normative activities to illuminate what it makes sense to say. The latter sort of practice belongs to the game because it illustrates its something like the rules of the game, but this is only one aspect of what is going on in the actual activity contexts of speaking.   Think of what goes on in the bleachers as a ball game is being played, for example. All of this activity belongs to a day at the park, but one could not teach baseball by attending to just anything that goes on at the park. Nor is there anything that protects this sort of grammatically unrelated activity from being criticized. The only thing that is protected from criticism is the rules of baseball B the normatively inscribed activity of grammar.[4]

But my concern, as I said, is to ask whether or not there is an internal connection between our practice and our understanding of *beliefs*, just as there is a grammatically-governed practice that exhibits the sense of our words.   This claim is problematic because we usually say that we understand a belief simply by knowing what it is about, and that makes it seem as if the *sense* of a belief were a function of its representational content. Thus, we may say that we can tell a scientific judgment from a religious belief because we know what these two different beliefs are about, but how does that knowledge tell us that the judgments themselves are different in kind, different in their logic? Here we seem to know intuitively that there are in-kind distinctions that need to be made about the different beliefs, just as we seem to know intuitively that our concepts belong to qualitatively distinct categories (physical objects, mental states, numbers, etc.). I want to suggest that both sorts of intuitions have the same ground. In the case of beliefs as well as in the case of concepts, the grammatical relation that language has to contexts of thought stands behind our ability to draw distinctions in their logical nature. In what follows, I want to develop this point.

II

Ordinarily we think that the activities that we engage in are the consequences of the logically prior beliefs that we hold to be true. What are people to do, for instance, if they doubt that they should continue in therapy designed to discover an insightful interpretation their dreams? The standard answer is that one needs first to decide whether dreams have any useful content to begin with. The whole premise of dream interpretation depends on the assumption that dreams contain potentially valuable information about the psyche; and this question, presumably, is a factual matter. As such, it needs to be addressed prior to engaging in the practice of analysis. Perhaps there is nothing to be discovered in dreams except the attitudes that we read into them. Perhaps they tell us nothing about the workings of the psyche. Whatever the case might be here, it seems people need to settle this question before resolving their doubts about whether or not to continue the practice of interpreting their dreams.[5]

Expressed in this way, the objection to portraying beliefs as if they were *internal to*, or *ingredient in*, a practice seems formidable. We have to know how things stand, what is true, before we can reasonably decide what to do. And yet the idea behind this seemingly obvious idea — that truth claims must be adjudicated independently of the roles that they have acquired in our practices — is a gross generalization; and those who stand unfailingly by it need to "look and see" if this rule of thumb is always justified. Often it is true that we demand firmness of belief before acting, but it is not true in every case. Below I want to suggest some truth claims that do not fit the categorical assumption that practice is always the consequence of beliefs that can be assessed independently of practical or personal concerns. Sometimes the affirmation of a belief *simultaneously includes* a change in practice.

To see how this is so, consider the odd propositions that Wittgenstein calls certainties — that the world has a long history, that people do not have sawdust in their heads, that people have to breathe to stay alive, etc.[6] It is grammatically unusual to describe these certainties as *beliefs* at all, since they are rarely even formulated. Generally, when we express our convictions — when we say "I believe..." — we do so in recognition of the possibility of disagreement. We formulate our convictions to announce our stance, to confess our viewpoint, to focus on an issue. The characteristic feature of the claims that Wittgenstein described as certainties, however, is that *in ordinary circumstances* it makes no sense to treat them as controversial. They are too obvious for that, too deeply anchored in our thinking for evidence to support, since their truth is as secure as anything that might serve them as a ground. As long as extremely unusual circumstances do not obtain, giving us a special reason to doubt, these unspoken beliefs stand fast, lying apart from the route traveled by inquiry (*OC*, 88).

Yet if we cannot intelligibly doubt such certainties — if we rarely have any reason even to formulate them — how is it that we come to believe them? Wittgensteins answer is that we have come to *act* in ways that show confidence about them. When scientists, for example, examine the occipital lobe for changes in neuronal activity corresponding to perceptual

reports, they take it for granted that human beings have brains, that brains are vital to bodily sensations, that human beings who are dead show no signs of sensation, etc.   Thus if you asked such scientists whether all living people have brains, they would have a hard time making any sense out of your question. Everything that they do, everything that we all do — our *lives* — tell us that this question need not even be put. Its truth is presumed in the countless ways in which we have come to think and live. Imagining a doubt like this is, in fact, rather like imagining a high-level debate among officials of the (American) National Football League over changing the rules for spotting the ball for point-after-touchdown attempts. If in the middle of that discussion, one of the officials were to ask, "Does one keep score in football?," the others would be dumbfounded. They would have no idea where such a question could come from. After all, we are talking about people who officiate in football games, assess penalties, keep track of the clock, judge field goal attempts, etc. What sense does it make for one of those people to ask if one keeps score in football? Anyone who participates in all of these activities must already be certain of that. This certainty is contained in knowing how to play the game. It is "swallowed down" in that training (*OC*,143).

Some of our beliefs, that is, are silently absorbed in that training wherein we learn how to think — i.e., what to doubt, what to rely on, when to question, and so forth. It is this training that teaches us how to conduct ourselves as reasonable people in lifes various activities. As we learn to think in these many ways, various convictions come to be held in place, not because they have been or could be confirmed, but because the complicated process of raising up other issues as dubious questions includes behavior that swallows them down in wordless confidence. Were it meaningful to doubt such truisms, the whole edifice of the relevant reasoning processes would collapse. The agreement in behavior that reasoning entails would be suspended. Were this to happen, we would no longer know *how* to think, where to stand, what facts to trust, what is and is not a good reason for doubt, etc. We would, quite literally, be too disoriented to know what to count as thinking at all.

The point to be stressed here is not so much the anti-skeptical bent of Wittgensteins remarks, but the fact that in the case of certainties *believing and behaving amount to virtually the same thing*. One could say, in fact, that the *behavior* of believing — knowing where to stand, what to use as evidence, etc. — simply *is* being certain about the most rudimentary things. Thus, if we go back to the original question — can all truth claims can be isolated from practice, as if they were the logically prior conditions for the practices in which they figure? — we would have to say no. Coming to believe in commonplace certainties is so interwoven with learning how to think that their judgment as truth claims cannot be isolated from the critical practice that we have mastered in learning how to reason. For again, the knowing how of reasoning itself entails acting without doubt about those things which form the background against we distinguish between truth and falsity (*OC*, 94).

This is a remarkable conclusion. It means, in effect, that some beliefs — or some ideas that skeptical philosophers held up as beliefs — are not only

introduced by essentially practical training but are secured in the same way. It belongs to their logical role that we find such certainties acceptable as reliable truths. Such judgments are not secured by inference, since our capacity to make reasonable inferences ultimately depends on a practical agreement in which their truth is already subsumed. That learned agreement is what makes good the whole process of inferring. Here it is the wordless certainty of our acting that lies at the bottom of a language-game (*OC*, 110, 204).

<center>III</center>

One reason why it is so difficult to accept the idea that the truth of certainties might be established in the way that behaviors are learned is that we think of all beliefs as being made true or false by objective matters of fact. Rather than being a function of our practice, we tend to think that their truth or falsity depends on their correspondence with the external world. Yet if this were all that there is to a belief — this mirroring relation to the world — then a belief's practical consequences would be no more than an afterword to the prior question of its truth or falsity. One would judge its truth vertically, as it were, comparing its content to the state of affairs that it represents, whereas its horizontal relation to its behavioral implications would be a secondary and separable matter. This vertical way of imagining the relation of truth claims to facts makes the relation between truth claims and their practical contexts seem completely accidental. Conceiving truth in this way makes it appear that there is little sense in saying say that some truths are inextricably intertwined with grammatically engendered capacities in our speaking, simply because this picture of comparing propositions to reality bypasses these practical considerations entirely. Even if certainties are initially accepted as the result of coming to participate in a practice, it seems that they must eventually be measured by their correspondence with fact, independently of their practical roles. If beliefs cannot be separated from practice and independently judged, they cannot be truth claims at all. They would then lack the sense — i.e., the cognitive significance — that consists in their having an independent representational content.

Sensible as this might sound, though, we cannot always separate the affirmation of our beliefs from capacities engendered in our practice, as the correspondence model of truth would suggest. The correspondence conception of truth expresses a completely *formal* notion; it provides no substantive or specific guidelines about what facts mean, what corresponding with external reality amounts to, or what using the world to judge truth claims entails. The requirement that truth be objective, at least in the bare sense that it must correspond to what is the case in reality, says nothing about the requirement that this correspondence relation must be established by one or another *method*. It *seems* to entail certain methods only because we confuse a whole nest of formal concepts with substantive understandings of how we are to determine a truth claim's correspondence with the world. For example, the positivistic view that all truth claims must be amenable to objective verification by the facts plays on a hidden

ambiguity in what is meant by "objectivity" and what is meant by "facts. "In the bare sense of these words, *all* truths, simply because they are true, state facts. They all characterize reality. They all depend on what is objectively the case, but only because the meaning of objective reality, fact, etc., is in this case a purely formal notion. *Anything* might count as an objective fact in this sense. If there are moral truths, they correspond with objective moral facts; and if there are mathematical truths, they state objective mathematical facts. But in the formal sense, the requirement that truths must state facts tells us nothing about what is to count as a fact or what needs to be done to ascertain the facts. Given the formality of the requirement that truth claims state objective facts, the range of what might qualify as a factually significant judgment lies completely open.

The problem is that the notions of objectivity, factuality, reality, etc. also have substantive meanings, and these are easily confused with the formal sense employed in the requirement that all truths must state objective facts. In the more substantive sense of objectivity, for example, an objective truth is one to be judged impersonally as a description — that is, according to facts that can be presented *as givens*. But this notion of an objective truth characterizes only those statements that can be judged directly or indirectly according to information (factual input) that can be unproblematically *presented* to us, as a *fait accompli*, as it were. To see whether an objective description is true, therefore, one compares the descriptive content of the claim with material that is acceptable as a report on the world. Whether these reports come to us in the form of perceptions or in terms of other given information does not matter: the key point is that the telling thing in the judgment of descriptive claims is supplied *for us*, or given *to us*, irrespective of attitudes that might otherwise influence what we regard as true. This is the idea that lies behind positivism's claim that the facts that count (i.e., empirical facts) are always *posited* or *given* facts. That is the important thing, not simply that truth claims must be adjudicable empirically but also that the ground of this judgment rests in the immediate acceptability of something given.

The same point is contained in the commonplace idea that true beliefs must correspond with *facts*. Facts too are givens; they have been settled, they are reliable, they represent the grounds for inferential claims — all because facts in this sense are understood as being accepted *before any judgments are made*. The facts are what they are, so to speak, irrespective of what we might make of them or conclude from them. That is a grammatical remark that defines one important sense of the word *fact*. Thus, when we speak of interpreting the facts, we do so only because we can draw a distinction between what can be taken for granted — the facts — and what lies with us to make of these facts. The facts here are objective precisely because they are not in dispute and can be taken for granted, as if they were simply presented as a report from the world. What cannot be taken for granted in this way necessarily requires some interpretive judgment *from us*, and this obviously is why we distinguish such issues from objective matters, calling them subjective issues, interpretive questions, personal assessments, etc. These matters can never be resolved without weighing the facts, seeing them in a certain light, or holding them in a particular per-

spective. Judgment is required is such cases because issues of truth and falsity cannot be rested on mere reports of what is the case.

Evaluative judgments are the clearest examples. They differ *in kind* from scientific hypotheses because their truth cannot be rested on the reference to something given. That is why we so often say that the world of value is subjective, while the world of science is objective. Here the word "world" is being used in a particular way. The scientific or purely descriptive world of facts requires nothing of the believers sensitivities or capacities for understanding themselves in relation to others. Scientists, as scientists, simply receive factual deliverances into their thinking, allowing these facts (ideally) to determine their empirical judgments. In this world the scientists' moral capacities have little relevance. Yet when it comes to evaluative or moral judgments, people are asked to see naked facts in a discerning way that requires such capacities, for which the would-be believer is responsible. For without such capacities for moral discernment the world of value does not open up. To enter that world — to see moral realities — we have to supply the perspective in which the given facts of any situation are no longer simply given but given in the light of their practice-altering moral implications.

This much, I think, is reasonably clear. What is less clear is that the concept of a fact, defined as something that is acceptable, reliable, or simply given, also allows for us to speak of *moral facts* in certain circumstances. Certainly, when moral or evaluative facts of a case are not in dispute — when we can rely on moral seeing as surely as we can rely on ordinary perception — then some moral judgments might qualify as facts in this sense. These moral facts are not, of course, scientific facts since they register on us only as moral insights. Yet they are still facts to the extent that they have the same kind of immediate acceptability as anything else that can be taken as a given. If there are such moral facts, then some other moral judgments can be *rested* on them as argumentative premises. This may sound strange to those who think that there are no settled facts when it comes to morality, axiology, teleology, etc. But for those who realize that our capacity to enter into moral judgment depends on some underlying agreement in our moral reactions, it does not sound unusual at all to speak of our agreement on this fundamental level in terms of the recognition of moral facts.

Thus, as an example, one might describe Mr. Smith's reprehensible treatment of Mr. Jones quite naturally as a fact, as long one anticipates no doubts to arise by saying so. Sometimes such things are plain, and when they are, we can speak of them as facts. Or to take a sharper example, Raimond Gaita has recently argued that racists fail to realize the moral fact that those whom they denigrate are fully human. He claims that racists cannot imagine that cares and concerns of those they denigrate — e.g., about the loss of a child — can go as deep in them as they do among themselves. The inability to see in others the kind of humanity that deserves respect is the characteristic feature not only of most forms of racial prejudice but of genocidal attitudes as well. To argue on inferential grounds that we all have this kind of humanity is otiose, simply because it takes the point at issue as something that *requires* an argument. Its truth is more

immediate than that, and so Gaita quite naturally characterizes this atti-
tude as a mistake over moral facts.[7] He characterizes their error in this way
because he expects his readers to agree with him, not because he can show
skeptics error of their ways by providing them with more adequate
descriptive data for drawing inferences. Thus, instead of even attempting
such an argument, he simply expects us to recognize a non-discriminating
regard for others as something so basic that its truth is a condition for
moral discernment. That the humanity of people elicits our moral regard
needs no justification. All people possess humanity in this sense. And this
fact defines the moral world.

My point here is not to raise issues in moral philosophy; it is simply to
show that the concept of an intuited fact is sometimes related more to what
can be taken for granted than to a descriptive truth intuited through the
senses. This use of the word "fact" as something taken for granted varies,
naturally, according to whatever is accepted as a matter of course in a cer-
tain community of discourse. Thus, it cuts across the usual factual (objec-
tive and scientific)/non-factual (subjective and evaluative) distinction. But
it too has its basis in grammar.[8]

Let us return for a moment to Wittgensteins discussion of certainties.
We can see that there are truths that require something other than an infer-
ential judgment from logically prior or more certain facts. Judgment in
such cases is not deliberative at all; conviction arises out of the learned
activity in which a wordless certainty is held in place by an agreement in
form of life(*OC*, 358-59). I have already said that we are anything but
detached from such certainties. We are involved with them to the extent
that we have come to rely on them as the operative background for think-
ing, and our conviction that they are true is the consequence of this
reliance, not a product of objective judgment (*OC*,162, 204). Nor could it be
the product of such judgment, since being certain about such things
belongs to everything that we have come to know as a normal, rational,
outlook on life. Thus, in the absence of specific reasons for doubt, we
could not subject them to critical review without unhinging our capacity
to settle anything. For this capacity depends on an indefinite range of
background assumptions that serve us as a ground; and these assumptions
cannot, just like that, be rendered dubious merely by being questioned
(*OC*, 247, 257, 307). On the contrary, knowing how to utilize reliable
grounds for vetting our various beliefs is a form of practical mastery, a
knowing how that silently contains everything that we cannot help but to
trust if we are to go on reasoning as we do.

Here we do not learn what is reliable simply by trusting authorities, as if
the authorities were in a position to make better *objective* judgments than
we are able to make. *No one* is in a position to make objective judgments
without an enormous number of unarticulated assumptions that simply
stand fast (*OC*,105, 143, 162). The people who we think of as authorities —
teachers and parents — are in the same logical position as we are with
respect to the possibility of resolving the doubts of their children. The dif-
ference between teachers and children is that teachers already know *how* to
make responsible judgments, and it is that *capacity* that they communicate
in teaching children what to rely on and what to suspect. The implication

of this, once again, is that the believing which lies at the bottom of our rea-
soning belongs inseparably to something practical. *This* is what we do in
thinking (*OC*, 110, 128-29, 196, 204, 358).

Is there any way of *knowing* that the myriad of assumptions in this back-
ground are in fact true? No, not if this means checking their truth against
anything that is *more* certain, or which might serve us *more* reliably as a
ground of judgment. Yet there is no *need* to check on these truisms.
Indeed, there is ordinarily no *sense* even in attempting it. The role which
these truisms are afforded by our activity of judging immunizes them
against the abstract possibility of doubt. To doubt one of these truisms
means to have a reason for doubt, so that what is otherwise a certainty is in
specific circumstances lifted out of the realm of what must be taken for
granted. Without such specific reasons for doubt, the claims that
Wittgenstein described as certainties occupy a role in our thinking that
holds them fast.

But what if some people share a form of thinking that differs radically
from our own? What if they do not even understand some of the things
that we take for granted, and vice versa? In such cases, there simply might
be no common ground for the objective resolution of the issues, since we
surely cannot show the non-believer in such cases is making a mistake (*OC*,
75, 155-58). If we manage somehow to come up with grounds for our cer-
tainties, we will be arguing in a circle, as these grounds will reflect the very
kind of thinking that we want others to share in the first place (*OC* , 609-
611). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein offers a few hints about the possibility of
persuasion in such cases, but these thoughts are left largely undeveloped
(*OC* , 262, 612). I think that persuasion has to do with engendering those
capacities which, when developed, tend to hold convictions in place as
something like a certainty. But the one thing that is clear about persuasion
in this context, though, is that it has nothing to do with evidence. When one
searches for evidence for something that is ordinarily certain (e.g., to use
against non-believers), the whole notion of a supportive ground begins to
crumble. One no longer knows what it would take to settle a doubt, and if
something that one said did seem to settle a doubt, one would not know
how or why. To see this point is to realize that the capacity to participate in
various forms of judgment is the logical source of certainty.[9]

<div align="center">IV</div>

We thus come back to the view that there are claims that are held in
place by the weight of the whole process of making empirical judgments,
rather like the axis of a gyroscope is held fast by its rotary motion (*OC*, 144,
152, 248). *But this is true of a large number of differing kinds of judgment*, as
there are non-empirical claims that are secured in the same way. These are
factual claims of a sort, meaning that they too can come to occupy the same
logical role that certainties have. Although we have little or no choice
about our certainties, we can do without these higher-order, non-empirical
certainties. To see how and why this is the case is tantamount to realizing
the overall point at stake in this essay — that understanding the *sense* of a
belief, including the *kind* of belief that it is (moral, empirical, etc.) depends

on a clear view of the essential connection that it has with our practice.

To clarify this insight, suppose that we to turn to religious beliefs, which Wittgenstein also once described as Aregulative ideas.[10] Several passages in *On Certainty* suggest that the credibility of religious claims depends on the same kind of practical agreement that underlies our certainties (*OC*, 106-107, 239-240, 243). We have little or no choice about our certainties, however; they seem part and parcel of our ability to think at all. But we do have a choice about our religious beliefs, since our general capacities as rational people are unaffected by religious convictions. Thus, people might or might not come to share in a religious life, so that their beliefs acquire the stability of intuitive judgments, just as wordless certainties are held in place by less variable ways of thinking and living. I have no objection to saying this, but I do not want to leave the analysis of religious or regulative beliefs at this. Both of these beliefs have a distinctive kind of sense, and this is connected to what might be called their grammar. Understanding the sense of a certainty means seeing it as something that we have acquired in the practice of making judgments and that we have no reason to doubt, or even to formulate. Understanding the sense of a religious belief means seeing it as something that, if it is to become acceptable, must acquire a similar relation to practice.

Both sorts of belief — religious beliefs and certainties — occupy normative roles in the thinking of those who affirm them, and understanding their meaning means understanding this role. This role determines their sense, giving them the peculiar force of regulative ideas, so that the full understanding of their import has more to do with their behavioral implications than it does with their supposedly descriptive content. After all, one grasps the role of a certainty simply by *using* it as part of the inherited background against which other questions of truth and falsity are subjected to judgment (*OC*, 94). That is what it means to understand it in accordance with its logical status, according to the sense it bears as a truism. That is why it is so strange even to articulate such assertions; one conforms to their sense simply by going on with other matters in the practice of what we understand as reasonable thinking. And everyone does the same. That is what understanding their sense means — acting without doubt about them as one devotes attention to other more questionable matters.

Understanding the sense of a regulative or religious idea is essentially no different. The meaning of such a belief is a function of the role that it plays as a governing idea, and this gives it a force or a point that it would not otherwise have. With certainties, however, we already share in the rational practices that they anchor; but with religious beliefs, a believer must come to share a new system of judgment before the relevant sense of being capacitated can arise. Thus it is absolutely essential to a religious belief that it carry the point of a transformative idea, and that its affirmation entail conforming oneself with this aspect of its meaning. Religiously speaking, this is why believing makes the believer into a "new being"; for one must abide in the sense of a religious belief, conforming one's heart to the practice that the belief regulates, to be a believer at all.

We often lose sight of this point because religious beliefs *look* so much like metaphysical descriptions that we almost invariably judge them as if

their affirmation carried no more force than the affirmation of any meta-physical description. But if Wittgenstein is right, such beliefs are not repre-sentational claims (descriptions) at all, since their sense is due entirely to their role in defining religious paradigms of judgment. This role is sug-gested by what religious beliefs depict as being the case, and most believ-ers announce their faith by affirming this representation; and yet the sense of the belief is carried only by the *regulative function* that this depiction serves. Thus, if a religious description of facts does not further believers' compliance with the regulative role of the belief, the facts that it supposed-ly states are represented differently until it is *properly* understood — i.e., until the affirmation of its apparent form as a depiction agrees with its grammatical sense as a regulative idea. Admittedly, such a view runs against the grain of most of what passes for a philosophical understanding of religion's essential content. In the effort to find a correct religious repre-sentation of the world, most of us forget that correctness here is not mea-sured by objective standards but by compliance with the grammatical role that these representations play.   As a result, those who are anxious to find the descriptive truth in religion bracket the relevance faith's life (wherein the regulatory significance of its claims is illustrated) when it comes to the judgment of its claims. All this is reinforced by an overly simplistic view of what it means to speak of religious practice and its relevance to belief.

The reason for this latter point is not hard to understand. When we think of religious belief in relation to practice, we usually think of fairly gross or obvious forms of behavior such as keeping the Sabbath, reading the scriptures, donating to charities, making oracular confessions, and per-forming any number of other public and easily identifiable acts. We usual-ly do not think of more subtle behaviors that we use to identify the deepest and most characteristic attitudes of believers, such as their willingness to forgive, their admiration for impartial love, their peculiarly resilient hope-fulness, etc. Sometimes we speak of such inward or spiritual attitudes of the sort that can be easily hidden from the world, but it would be a mistake to think of these inner dispositions as being entirely private, as if they never showed themselves in *any* sort of behavior. For even the inner atti-tudes of faith must be recognizable in one's behavior, just as any inward or mental process must be outwardly identifiable.[11]   It is just that the identifi-cation of these inner attitudes is much more involved, and requires more discrimination, and takes more time to notice than the recognition of the contrasting forms of behavior that we describe as outward. Religious atti-tudes can still be shown in silent films, for example; the only difference being that outward behavior of believing can be shown in a few frames, but the inner attitudes of genuine faithfulness takes considerable more time to display.

The important point is that religious belief is tied to *some* behavior despite the fact that the performance of various overt religious acts does not in fact make one a believer. Hence it is true that there is no necessity that believers must go to church or participate in certain rituals or wear certain clothes to show their faith; what counts is that the transformation that believing intends goes deeper than that, affecting believers inward attitudes by altering the attitudes wherein they find themselves. Such

inward changes are not inferentially derived from the belief in God; they are inherent in the belief itself, properly understood as a regulative idea. In suggesting that religious beliefs are essentially related to practice, that is all that I meant — but it is an important point. The tie that exists between believing and what characterizes a persons self-relationship, the inner life that is hidden beneath gross forms of behavior, is a *logical* consequence of what it means to believe. Thus, when believers affirm the content of their belief without exhibiting *any* changes in their self-reflection, we can be sure that they do not believe at all. They may *say* that they believe, but then the absence of those changes that we expect from the acceptance of a regulative idea shows us that their behavior belies their words.

The New Testament makes this abundantly clear in the case of Christianity. Jesus utters woes against the Pharisees for cleaning the outside of the cup (being outwardly religious) but failing to clean the inside (being truly religious)(Matthew 23:34). The implication is that the Pharisees are hypocrites who pretend to believe but lack the inner dispositional transformations that characterize genuine belief. They make only an outward show of complying with religious teachings but know nothing of the *thoroughgoing* compliance that believing in God requires as a point of logic. We find the same thing in the book of James, where the author says that those who profess their belief but who do no good works to back up their claims have only a *dead* faith (James, 2:17-26). They too may *say* that they believe, but their practice bears none of the identifying works — i.e., the behavioral manifestations of belief — that we expect from true believers. Here we have to make the same distinction that we made above, separating the works that are the identifying consequences of belief from those that create nothing more than a show of faith. But as long as this difference is clear, James' remark about the relation between faith and works constitutes a grammatical claim. The belief that never manifests itself is dead not simply because it lacks obvious manifestations in outward practice, but because it lacks the inward consequences of that characterize the heart of faith.

From a philosophical point of view, this last point is critical. Believing that a religious doctrine is true *logically* entails conforming to the belief as a regulative idea. To believe without this subtle, inward or deep compliance is to miss the sense of believing altogether. The reason is simple: the behavioral changes made in this inward domain of subtle practice explain *what it means to believe.* The implications of this grammatical point are far-reaching. If one considers only the cognitive content of a belief, holding in abeyance the effort to comply with it as a regulative idea, one loses sight of the belief's point. One no longer focuses on the behavioral entailments of the belief, but abstracts the belief from the only means of clarifying what it means to adopt it. All that remains is a caricature of belief, which anyone who understands the force of the belief as a regulative idea will immediately recognize as a travesty of misunderstanding.

The conceptual point here does not apply only to religious beliefs. Think of someone who believes that something, say eating meat, is immoral, and yet at the same time betrays none of the characteristics that we expect from one who takes such a moral stance. She makes a show of professing the evils of meat-eating, but never avoids eating meat except in

public. Never does she feels guilty for this, nor show *any* of the disposi-
tional signs of truly complying with this moral ideal. Does she believe in
fact? Or is her profession of belief an empty show? At most we can say
that she *would like* to believe but has yet to commit herself. Perhaps she is
still struggling inside. Perhaps not. But how do we know any of this? We
know this in the same way that we know when a religious person is being
hypocritical. We recognize the lack of conviction from her behavior, that
is, from seeing that her *life* has not been fully transformed by telling conse-
quences of thinking that meat-eating is wrong.

The same applies to children who have yet to learn what it means to be
moral. They may say "that's bad" when they recognize an action as one
that their parents would disapprove of. But as long as th children are only
imitating their parents verbal reactions, they do not yet fully understand
what it means to make moral judgments. What is missing when this hap-
pens?   The children are morally undeveloped, to be sure; but we only
know this because we can see that they lack the complex forms of behavior
that we expect to find in those who are morally sensitive. They might not
yet exhibit any of the features of remorse, for example. Because *that* is
missing in their behavior, we say that they do not fully understand the
point of morality, or that they do not really believe, all because their lives
shows too little of the behavioral transformation that is the logical correlate
of belief.

With moral claims, the logical tie that exists between affirming a belief
and following its behavioral implications is not hard to accept; we already
know that such beliefs have a prescriptive force. We know that this pre-
scriptive force, moreover, is not an added overlay on top of a descriptive
moral meaning. It is constitutive of the claims meaning and therefore
inseparable from it.[12] Yet saying that a moral belief has this kind of force is
simply another way of saying what I have been saying all along: to affirm
these claims at all, one must affirm their force *as regulative ideas* — and that
means altering the relevant way in which one thinks and lives. That is
what makes moral beliefs *moral* in the first place — the normative or regu-
lative role that gives them their *point*. A similar kind of force belongs to the
meaning of other regulative beliefs — psychological principles, aesthetic
standards, policy statements, etc. To know what any of these claims
mean, one has to understand the force that they carry by virtue of the role
that they play in shaping our behavior in judging. That force is disclosed
in the behavior that shows what it means to affirm these ideas, even when
these judgments are announced in contexts that have only an accidental
relation to the role to which grammar assigns them.[13]

If this is correct, then the supposition that one can, as it were, *detach* the
cognitive content of a regulative claim from its behavioral implications is
deeply mistaken.   Supposedly one isolates this content from a claim's
behavioral ramifications in order to judge it reasonably, independently of
its effect on oneself. The detachment that this requires is the opposite of
what understanding requires. Since one cannot consider the religious
belief that God exists without appreciating this belief's force as a regulative
idea, one cannot understand the point of believing in it without bringing
its regulative implications into view. Apart from that, the grammar that

determines what the concept actually means[14] becomes unhinged, and the so-called cognitive meaning of the belief drifts further and further away from the practical engagements which reveal its regulative power. No one then can say what the point of such a belief is since it is no longer understood as a regulative idea. Philosophers who sense that something has gone wrong often scramble to somehow reconnect this lost force by trying to build it into to a restated account of the purely descriptive or representational content of the God-idea. But the so-called representational content of this belief semantically strips away the force that the belief carries by virtue of its grammatical *role*. This stripping away is the very thing that enables one to judge the supposed cognitive content of the claim independently of the personal practice required by faith. And yet apart from the transformations that express the regulative role of a religious claim, there is no telling what the claim is supposed to *mean* because one no longer knows what *kind* of belief is at issue. The essential *point* expressed in the words of the belief has disappeared.[15] Yet that is exactly what philosophers who set out to judge the question of God's existence objectively attempt to do — to judge the matter without regard to those conditions which afford the belief its regulative role and hence its force. This approach makes about as much sense as it does to ignore the prescriptive force of a moral claim in order to deal with the logically prior question of its cognitive content — which is to say, it makes no sense at all.[16]

After all, if the behavioral implications of believing in God followed from the purely descriptive fact that God exists, as if by some sort of inference, then there would be nothing to stop pseudo-believers from saying that their faith is genuine simply because they mouth its words. Indeed, they could then say that they have believed the only thing that *can* be believed B the purely descriptive (cognitive) content of the claims at issue. Since there are few if any behavioral implications that belong to such claims, this would seem to make perfectly good sense. Logic, they might think, does not force them to do anything more. No complaint can be lodged against them for not living what they profess to believe.

I am tempted to let the counter-intuitive nature of this last idea stand alone as a reason for rejecting it. Perhaps it is enough to point out that it flies in the face of New Testament warnings about the emptiness of believing without being inwardly renewed. But this in fact is not the only problem. We still have to ask how a loving disposition, for example, is supposed to follow from the purely descriptive fact of God's existence in the first place. What is the connection between a purely objective, descriptive, truth and the change that believers are expected to make as a result of affirming it? Perhaps there is an answer here,[17] but the natural theologians who believe that there is an answer here face the job of showing just how the behavioral, practical, or life-transforming consequences of believing are to be brought about. They cannot say that these consequences follow from the nature of the belief itself, for to say this would be to admit what I have been saying all along, that these beliefs have a regulative force *built into their logic*.

Finally, even if we could consider all beliefs apart from the grammatical entailments that give them their force, we would lose the ability to distin-

guish between kinds of belief. We could not speak of there being different kinds of truths and senses of reality, requiring different kinds of discernment, since the question of factual truth would be logically cut off from the grammatical ingrained roles that we rely on in making these distinctions. How is it, after all, that we are able to distinguish historical claims from psychological judgments, or mathematical truths from moral insights? We can say that we know what such beliefs are about, but how does this tell us what kind of thinking is involved. We know what these beliefs mean only because we know how to comply with their grammatical implications, which extend to the kind of thinking that their acceptance presumes. If we did not have this sort of grammatical understanding to go by in discriminating between different kinds of beliefs, the whole spectrum of everything that we call a belief would collapse into one homogeneous lot. We would then have only the content of beliefs to go by, so that all beliefs would be essentially representational. None would have the *in-built* regulative significance that comes from being connected to differing forms of judgment requiring different means of compliance.

So far I have argued that we affirm regulative beliefs, such as religious beliefs, by complying with their grammatical role in transforming the manner in which one sees the world. The same might also be said to describe the affirmation of non-regulative or so-called objective beliefs. In recognizing such beliefs as *objective* beliefs, we comply with their grammar that governs their judgment, which requires us to rest their claim to truth on the facts — i..e, on the unchallenged reports that we get from observing the world. Thus, when we realize that it is not up to us personally to establish their truth, we do so because we recognize the grammatical character of these assertions. We allow the facts to determine their truth, in other words, precisely because we *comply* with the grammar that governs their judgment. This sort of compliance does not lead us to change the *manner* in which we attend to experience, as it does in the case of regulative beliefs, but it still conforms to the form of judgment that is proper to an objective issue. In that sense, it still counts as compliance.

In the end there is no getting away from the fact that in making distinctions between different kinds of beliefs we are guided by grammatical norms, which give our words their meaning and our regulative beliefs their sense. There is no such thing as understanding any belief which is removed from this kind of practical knowing.

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NOTES

1.   See John Whittaker, "Language-games and Forms of Life Unconfused," *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 1, No. 4, November 1978, pp. 39-46.

2.   William Hyde was a respondent to an earlier version of this paper presented at the inaugural meeting of the North American Wittgenstein Society, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2000. I owe much to the comments that he made then and afterwards.

3.   *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (Basingstoke; Macmillan, 1986), ch. 1.

4.   This does not mean grammatically governed activities are absolutely immune from suggestions for change. With the knowledge gained from animal studies, for example, some of the things that we regard as sensible to say about animals might change, possibly for good reason. But, and this is crucial, such changes in what we say about animals *must be teachable*; that is, they must have a grammatical foundation provided by the careful observations and new information provided by animal studies. When conceptual changes are not provided for by changes in what we know, one side usually cannot understand the other sides usage at all.

5.   In other words, *if* the claim at issue is a purely factual question, then, according to the view I am discussing, the importance of dream interpretation will depend on it, since otherwise that activity is practically pointless. If, on the other hand, the truth of this question cannot be determined independently of the insiders recognition of the appeal of the practice itself, then there is no *logically prior* cognitive issue at stake here. Instead, the issue about whether or not one is talking about anything *real* is thoroughly bound-up in the practice itself. The rest of what follows in this essay can be understood as a plea for the general sense of this latter kind of interpretation.

6.   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. E. M Anscombe and Dennis Paul (New York; Harper Torchbooks, 1972). Hereafter cited as *OC*, followed by the entry (not the page) number.

7.   Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (London and New York; Routledge, 1998), pp. 57ff.

8.   See J. L. Lucas, "On Not Worshiping the Facts," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 8 (1958), pp. 144-156.

9.   I have tried to elaborate on Wittgenstein's suggestion about the possibility of a non-evidential form of persuasion in "Can A Purely Grammatical Inquiry be Religiously Persuasive?" in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. By Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (new York; St. Martins Press, 1995), ch 13; and again in "At the End of Reason Comes Persuasion" in *The Possibilities of Sense: Essays in Honour of D. Z. Phillips*, forthcoming from Palgrave.

10.   *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barrett (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1967), p. 54.

11.   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York; Macmillan, 1953), para. 580.

12.   This is not to deny that the judgments that I am calling moral might presume factual descriptions in virtue of which these evaluations are made. But whatever the conditions might be for the application of a moral evaluation, the evaluation is itself inherently prescriptive.

13.   Perhaps I should not generalize too much about religion in this respect. As the editor of this journal pointed out, the acceptance of certain so-called primitive religions might not involve the same kind of transformation involved in the affirmation of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. Maybe so, but it is difficult to sort out the relevant issues. *For us* there may be a clear difference between secular and religious ways of thinking. But for so-called primitives, there may not be a sharp distinction. *For them* no secular alternatives may be imaginable. Thus, there may be nothing for them to fall back on given the loss of what we might call a religious component in their view of the world, leaving them with no secular form of understanding to measure the transformation involved in changing from non-belief to belief.

14.   The implication here is that the apparent meaning of a religious claim might not be its real meaning. This is because the meaning of a certain reli-

gious description (a certain picture) is given by its *use* rather than by its apparent representational content. That this is so in the case of religious beliefs is one of the themes of Wittgensteins *Lectures and Conversations* (see pp. 63-4, 71-2).

15. However the characteristic manifestations of belief are explicated, they will show that assertion of God's existence carries a transformative force. I think that a new type of hope, for example, is built into a believers affirmation. This hope is neither built up nor justified in any of the normal ways we ground our hopes, and so it can be recognized in the curious resiliency of believers who refuse to despair in situations that are hopeless by all worldly standards.

16. There may be some who would say that one can recognize that something is obligatory or right and still have no disposition whatever to comply with this judgment in any practical sense. This is not the place for a lengthy counter-argument, but I would suggest that when they deny the necessity of practical compliance, they either mistake outward compliance with inner disposition or they assume that moral judgments reflect essentially prudential strategies.

17. The answer that believers need to make certain behavioral changes out of prudence, seeing the extent of God's power, is repugnant for at least three reasons. First, it assumes that self-interest governs the religious life; second, it covertly introduces the value of self-preservation into an argument that supposedly begins *without any* evaluative presumptions; and third, it suggests that believers have an *option* of bringing their behavior in line with their beliefs. None of these is the case. If they bring none of their behavior into line with their beliefs, they do not believe religiously at all.