James and Wittgenstein on religious belief[1]

Paolo Tripodi

Abstract: The paper suggests that both Wittgenstein in his later period and James in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* put forward a view of religious belief which is very close to epistemic relativism. This is not to say, however, that they expressly considered the relativist account of religious belief as a philosophical goal to be pursued. In the interpretation proposed in this paper, epistemic relativism is rather a (contingent) by-product of their common attitude towards pluralism and anti-reductionism in philosophy.

Keywords: William James; Wittgenstein; religious belief; Rorty; epistemic relativism.

1. *Preliminary similarities*

James and Wittgenstein never met: James died in the United States in 1910; Wittgenstein went to Britain in the same period. However, James was one of the few writers whose work Wittgenstein read and reread again and again. Not only *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) but also – what really matters for the purpose of this paper – *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Wittgenstein read James' *Varieties* in 1912, when he was in Cambridge as a student of Russell. In a postcard sent to Russell in the same year, Wittgenstein wrote that he was reading James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and that it did him a lot of good (Wittgenstein 1974: 9). The content of this postcard is well-known and has already been analyzed by invoking Wittgenstein's and James' personal and broadly cultural connections and similarities (Goodman 2002: 11).

Both James and Wittgenstein suffered from morbid fears. In the *Varieties*, James acknowledged himself as in some way a "helpless failure", and described his own morbid fears in the account of an anonymous "correspondent" (James 1902: 150; Goodman 2002: 40). Not only did Wittgenstein suffer the same kind

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of fears (for example, he once told Drury about his childhood fears, induced by a pattern of fallen plaster on the wall of his home's lavatory, and said that he still suffered from these fears while a student at Manchester in 1910), but he was also convinced that "only religious feelings are a cure for such fears" (Drury 1984: 116). Furthermore, both of them described the peculiar religious experiences experienced by "sick souls", those people for whom evil is something essential, which cannot be cured by any superficial change of the environment or of the self, but requires a supernatural intervention (James 1902: 127). They both described the experience of distress and absolute loneliness, melancholy, the perception of failure, the fear of death, the recognition of sin as something essential to our life (James 1902; Wittgenstein 1998). Both greatly admired Tolstoy and focused on his conversion and on the peculiar experience that led to it. During the First World War, Wittgenstein found Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* in a small bookshop, and he started reading it on September 1914. Then he carried it with him at all times, memorizing passages of it by heart. He became known to his comrades as "the man with the gospels", and he constantly recommended the book to anyone who was troubled. Also Tolstoy's *Confession* had a great influence on him. Tolstoy's *Confession*: one of James' main documents in the *Varieties*. James presented Tolstoy's case to show that deep melancholy or despair may be followed by conversion (James 1902: 140). Finally, both Wittgenstein and James were interested in religion as something personal rather than as something related to religious institutions. The topic of the *Varieties* were religious feelings and impulses, to be investigated by studying those subjective phenomena that are recorded in works of piety and autobiography (James 1902: 12; see also 440). Similarly, in his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein said that religion (as much as ethics) is, above all, "an entirely personal matter" (Wittgenstein 1993: 41). This explains why at the end of the lecture he found it essential to speak in the first person (Waismann 1965: 16).

Beside such personal and broadly cultural similarities, there is also a significant *philosophical* agreement between James and Wittgenstein on religion. Both James in the *Varieties* and Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* described and to a certain extent accepted a form of mysticism. Lectures XVI and XVII of the *Varieties* are dedicated to mysticism. In James' view religious experience is deeply rooted in mystical states of consciousness, though he recognized that he could speak of such states only at second hand (James 1902: 342). This notwithstanding, in the *Varieties* he presented a list of the features of mystical states: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity. As is well-known, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein spoke of the Mystical. According to the *Tractatus*' austere conception of language, meaningful sentences can do nothing but describe, or misdescribe, facts; such sentences ultimately are combinations of names, that is,

words that name objects (Wittgenstein 1953, I: § 1). Only descriptive sentences (which are pictures of states of affairs and can be true or false) can be meaningful. Thus, every non-descriptive "sentence" is strictly speaking senseless (it is not a sentence proper). In particular, all religious matters belong to the sphere of "what cannot be said". Therefore "one must be silent" about such things, even though they are the most important aspects of life, and those that mattered most to Wittgenstein himself (Wittgenstein 1971: § 7). In a word: based on a revolutionary theory of meaning, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein agreed with James that mystical truths are ineffable (Hyman 2001: 4).

All this is well-known, but it concerns above all the connection between James' in the *Varieties* and the early Wittgenstein. However, not only did Wittgenstein keep on admiring James throughout his life (Drury 1984: 106) but, perhaps more importantly, in his post 1929 writings and lectures he also shared with James a fundamental philosophical attitude, which might be called "pluralism": both James and (the later) Wittgenstein thought that philosophy should describe a great variety of phenomena and be aware of the differences, rather than attempting to find general and reductive theories (for a comparison between James' and Wittgenstein's philosophical attitudes, with a special concern for issues related to ethics, see Marchetti 2015: 256 ff.; for a general overview, Misak 2016: Ch. 7).

Russell Goodman has noticed that the point of origin for the proliferation of the term "pluralism" "in English language metaphysics and epistemology at the turn of the nineteenth century is William James" (Goodman 2012: 155). Goodman has listed several senses in which James employs the terms "pluralism" and "pluralistic": pluralism as indeterminism; extractive pluralism, according to which any entity might have been removed from the world universe while everything else remains the same; entity pluralism, the claim that there are many particulars, each of which is unique; scheme pluralism, the view that there are many correct descriptions of the world; point of view pluralism, which holds that there are incommensurable points of view on the universe, each of which equally legitimate; and ethical pluralism, according to which there are different but equally valid systems of values, and we should respect all of them. One might say that pluralism (variously conceived) is not a feature among others, but the centre and meaning of James' philosophy. Moreover, James' pluralism was radical. For example, in a 1910 letter to Minot Judson Savage he wrote: "All that my pluralism contends for is that there is no where extant a complete gathering up of the universe in one focus, either of knowledge, power, or purpose. Something escapes, even from God" (cited in Goodman 2012: 155). Pluralism is also, for James, a way of conceiving humankind and its place in the universe. He did not believe that human experience is the

highest form of experience in the universe; rather, he thought that we stand in a similar relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and pets do to the whole of human life: "They inhabit our drawing-rooms and libraries. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends of which pass wholly beyond their ken" (James 1907: 619). This attitude is related to the kind of pluralism that Goodman labels "scheme pluralism": according to James, there is no ringing answer to the question, Which of these schemes is the true one? Rather, each point of view (common sense, science, philosophy, religion) is better for one sphere of life or another (James 1907: 569; see also 116). For the purposes of this paper, it is also important to notice that in James' view pluralism is strictly connected to anti-reductionism, and the latter is in turn related to tolerance: pluralism

> absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sickrooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field (James 1899: 264).

In Wittgenstein's later philosophy pluralism is not only a general attitude but also a methodological orientation, strictly connected to a radically anti-reductionist philosophical anthropology. An important source of Wittgenstein's pluralism is the idea that in philosophy "we must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place" (Wittgenstein 1953, I: § 109). The following is but a short list of countless remarks expressing Wittgenstein's pluralist attitude in the *Philosophical Investigations*, an attitude which is summarized in King Lear's dictum, "I'll teach you differences" (in fact, at a certain point Wittgenstein thought that that sentence could be a good motto for his book) (Drury 1984: 157; on this issue see Boncompagni 2016: 263 ff.): "But what does this mean? Well, it may mean various things…" (Wittgenstein 1953, I: § 6); "in fact we do the most various things with our sentences" (§ 26); "it is possible to be interested in a phenomenon in a variety of ways" (§ 108); "well, there is a variety of cases here" (1953, II: 211), and so forth. In a similar vein, Wittgenstein often presents pluralism as opposed to dogmatism. For instance, he compares "the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the various ways in which we use them", on the one hand, with the dogmatic descriptions of the

structure of language provided by logicians, including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* on the other hand (1953, I: § 23). He famously writes:

> Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called "games"' – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! – Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships (§ 66).

These considerations bring us naturally to the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance (1953, I: § 67), which – as commentators have noted (Goodman 2002: 53; Hallett 1977: 40; Baker and Hacker 1980: 325) – was anticipated by James in the *Varieties*. Consider, in particular, the following passage:

> [T]he word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion (James 1902: 32).

The oversimplifications of the theorizing mind, one-sided dogmatism, sectarian scientism: these are Wittgenstein's and James' common targets in philosophy, in particular, as I shall attempt to show in the following parts of this paper, in the philosophy of religion. My main aim in what follows is to compare certain aspects of James' views on religious belief in the *Varieties* with Wittgenstein's later remarks on the gulf between (a certain kind of) believers and non-believers, and to claim that in both Wittgenstein and James we may find all the ingredients – some explicit, some more implicit – of a kind of factual epistemic relativism (see Coliva 2010: 188 for a distinction between factual and virtual relativism). For dialectical reasons, I shall first consider an interpretation I do not agree with, namely, that presented by Richard Rorty in a 2004 article entitled *Some Inconsistencies in James'* Varieties, and I shall provide the reasons why I do not agree with it.

2. "More than just a pragmatist"

According to Rorty (2004: 86), James' book "is riddled with inconsistencies. These are not merely incidental. They stem from James's inability to make up his mind between arguing that supernaturalism might be true because it might be good for you and arguing that it is in fact true because there is ample experi-

ential evidence for it". In Rorty's view, the main inconsistency depends on, and is revealed by, the ambiguous ways in which James' uses the terms "religious" and "experience". This is clear, for example, when James tries to answer the following questions:

> "Would it still count as being religious if one regarded this divine soul as 'a mere quality like the eye's brilliancy or the skin's softness' rather than as 'a self-conscious life like the eye's seeing or the skin's feeling?" – "Are the causes of religious experience entirely irrelevant to their value for human life, or do we have empirical evidence that these experiences have a supernatural cause, and therefore reason to believe in the existence of an entity unknown to natural science?" (Rorty 2004: 86).

Rorty suggests that in the *Varieties* there are two different and incompatible kinds of answer to such questions. On the one hand, in one selection of passages, James plays the role of a natural theologian, an empirical enquirer who studies human experience and is in a position to conclude for the existence of a self-conscious nonhuman life as we do for the existence of material objects (tables, islands, penguins). On the other hand, another selection of passages leads to an entirely different reading of the book, a reading in which James seems to be indifferent to the question of the existence of God, whereas he is concerned with how people can cope with despair and depression (86). Looking at this second set of passages, we are induced to reduce James' saving experiences (and the wider self through which they come) either to the believer's subconscious self (Freud) or to the community of causes and consequences in which we are involved (Dewey) (Rorty 2004: 86). In Rorty's view, the former interpretation of the book – James as a natural theologian – is supported by the sort of passages that occur in abundance at the end of the *Conclusions*: a paradigmatic case of this sort of passages is James' remark that "Religion, in her fullest exercise of function, is not a mere illuminator of facts already elsewhere given, not a mere passion, like love, which views things in a rosier light. […] It is something more, namely, a postulator of new facts" (1902: 462). This remark seems to tell us that religious experiences support what James calls an "over-belief", that is, the view according to which the natural constitution of the world makes materialism false (1902: 462-463). Rorty maintains, however, that the latter interpretation – James as a pragmatist who takes a more cautionary stance, similar to the one he adopted in *The Will to Believe* – is supported by those passages, especially in the first chapters, in which James makes the following points (here expressed in Rortyan terms): both science and religion may be useful, but there cannot be any conflict between different practical results; the question, Which of the two corresponds to the way in which the world *really* is?, is a bad one (Rorty 2004: 88-89). According to such pure prag-

matism, the term "religious" is just a synonym for "vitally important to a person's self-image", and there is no significant difference between "total reactions upon life" that are religious and those that are not. Nietzsche's total reaction is not less religious than Arnold's or Emerson's. And there is no sharp divide between Stoic, Buddhist and Christian saints' feelings and behaviour, on the one hand, and atheistic moralists' attitudes and conduct, on the other hand (89-90).

Rorty seems to suggest that the tension he sees in the *Varieties* depends on James' failure to understand that the purely pragmatic view, the reduction of experiences to their practical effects, is as incompatible with medical materialism, according to which many religious experiences are caused by a chance surplus of serotonin and are mere symptoms of mental pathology, as it is incompatible with theological supernaturalism, according to which religious experiences are caused by an immaterial entity (which is itself the remote efficient cause of a rearrangement of neural impulses) (Rorty 2004: 91). It goes without saying that Rorty takes side with the former, purely pragmatic view. Not only does he think that this kind of reductive pragmatism is similar to Dewey's redefinition of "religious" (according to which the term applies as much to Arnold and Emerson as to Nietzsche or Marx), but he is also convinced that such a view is shared by Wittgenstein, Sellars, Brandom, and Dennett, whose pragmatism is entirely disconnected from empiricism and therefore has no metaphysical shortcomings, no views about what is really real (94). According to Rorty, James fully belongs to this purely pragmatic tradition, in which what really matters to religious life is whether the belief in God is useful to the believer. However, in the *Conclusions* of the Varieties, he betrays his pragmatism, since he deals with the question of the existence of God (a question which a pure pragmatist should consider as utterly irrelevant) and seems to think that it can be answered by providing sufficient evidence (the kind of evidence provided by the experiences of religious virtuosi), so that it becomes rational to admit that naturalism is false (95).

It seems to me that Rorty is right when he says that James in the *Varieties* is "more than just a pragmatist" (96). However, I see two main problems with his interpretation. First, Rorty attributes a *clear* inconsistency to a *great* philosopher: not a hidden, subtle inconsistency, but a clear, obvious one. Under Rorty's interpretation, James would be at the same time a reductive pragmatist and a supernaturalist, that is, one who thinks that the experiences of religious believers provide evidence sufficient to make it rational to give up naturalism. This kind of inconsistency lacks any subtlety, because a supernaturalist in this sense is, straightforwardly, not a pragmatist at all.

Secondly, Rorty interprets James' and Wittgenstein's views as a sort of *reductive* pragmatist, but this is incompatible with their deeply rooted pluralism

and antireductionism, which many interpreters consider as a central feature or trademark of their philosophies. If James had been a reductive pragmatist in Rorty's sense, he would have simply considered the term "religious" as a synonym for "vitally important to a person's self-image". This would have been nothing but a *reduction* of religious belief in *non-religious* terms. But pluralism is constitutively anti-reductionist. And pluralism – conceived of as the attempt to describe the varieties of religious experiences in a non-dogmatic, hence non-theoretical, way – is perhaps the main point of the *Varieties*.

Even more importantly, it can be shown in the text that, *pace* Rorty, in the *Varieties* James is not a reductive pragmatist. For example, at one point James claims that, if one accepts the "principle of pragmatism" (that is, Peirce's principle that a belief is significant insofar as it has practical consequences), then one may decide "among various attributes set down in the scholastic inventory of God's perfections, whether some be not far less significant than others" (James 1902: 399-400). James concludes that God's moral attributes (holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, justice, love, and unalterability) are much more significant than God's metaphysical attributes (aseity, necessariness, immateriality, simplicity, indivisibility, actual infinity, and so forth), because the former, but not the latter, "enter into connection with our life" and "positively determine fear and hope and expectation, and are foundations for the saint life" (401). Throughout the book he never says, however, that, say, Tolstoy's belief in God's omniscience and holiness is *nothing but* a set of natural attitudes, feelings and emotions, which Tolstoy has. James, as a pluralist, clearly acknowledges that a believer such as Tolstoy believes, first of all, that God exists and is a Person, and – as a pluralist – he is interested in *describing* Tolstoy's beliefs and attitudes, rather than in *reducing* the former (the beliefs) to the latter (the emotional, non-cognitive attitudes).

In the *Varieties*, James presents his own pluralism as opposed to the sectarian scientific attitude (a reductionist attitude, by the way), and he describes it as the persuasion "that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also". This pluralistic attitude, he makes clear, is not a philosophical preference among others, but rather it is strictly associated with "the whole drift of [his] education" (463).

Moreover, James explicitly rejects Leuba's reductionist view, according to which "Does God really exist?", "How does he exist?", "What is he?" are irrelevant questions, and according to which the end of religion is nothing but a richer and more satisfying life (Leuba 1901; James 1902: 453). The reason why he does not accept such a view has to do with the objective truth of the believers' beliefs. The term "truth" in this context – James is clear about that

– is "taken to mean something additional to bare value for life" (456). In fact, believers all agree that the "more", with which their selves in the religious experience come into relation, really exists, and it acts and changes their lives (for the better) (456): as a pluralist, he can't help emphasizing all this. Similarly, he also writes that the positive content of religious experience is "literally and objectively true" (460).

2. *Epistemic relativism*

Rorty rightly points out that there is a tension in the *Varieties*. However, he does not identify the real tension. First, James does not think that, as Rorty would say, "the experiences of religious virtuosi provide evidence sufficient to make it only rational for naturalists to give up their naturalism". He thinks, rather, that the experiences of religious virtuosi provide evidence sufficient to make religious virtuosi *themselves* believe that naturalism is false. "Evidence" is the keyword here, for James is convinced that religious virtuosi's beliefs are somewhat *justified*: this is not to say, however, that according to him it is strictly speaking *rational* for religious believers to reject naturalism. Religious experience is not ordinary experience, and it does not provide ordinary (let alone scientific) reasons to believe. Nonetheless, it is experience, after all; and, after all, it provides reasons or grounds to believe (see 1902: 22).

In the *Varieties* James is, as Rorty would say, more than just a pragmatist, but not because he is at the same time a Rortyan reductionist and a supernaturalist. The reason why he is more than a pragmatist is rather, as I shall claim in what follows, that he is a special sort of epistemic relativist. Here I am employing the following notion of epistemic relativism, borrowed from Coliva (2010: 202-203): epistemic relativism is the view according to which there could be, either in principle or as a matter of fact, one epistemic system (that is, either a central core of beliefs in hinge propositions – those "basic" propositions that stand fast for us, and provide a condition for other propositions to make sense – or a set of methods and criteria of justification), call it B, alternative to (or even incompatible with) our own epistemic system, call it A; systems A and B are equally correct; we, who adopt A, are able to understand B but, if we met people who adopt B, we could not rationally persuade them to abandon some of their hinges in favour of ours; nonetheless, we should not revise our translation of some of their words. In the interpretation I am putting forward, epistemic relativism is not a view which James explicitly holds in the book; it is just a somewhat implicit by-product of his radical pluralism and anti-reductionism. I am not suggesting, however, that pluralism entails epistemic relativism. My claim is rather that, as a matter of fact,

in the *Varieties* we find all the main ingredients of a form of epistemic relativism, whose main source is James' pluralist and anti-reductionist attitude.

First of all, in the picture provided by James in the *Varieties* there are two alternative, in fact, incompatible systems of beliefs. Naturalists (non-believers) and religious believers (e.g., Tolstoy) have incompatible beliefs: for instance, "God exists and produces immortality", on the one hand, and "God doesn't exist and I have doubts on immortality", on the other hand. Of course, such beliefs would not be strictly speaking incompatible, if they were reducible in terms of attitudes towards life. Beliefs, not attitudes, can be compatible or incompatible in this sense. However, that James' is not an expressivist view of credal statements is clear not only when he says that almost every religious believer has the over-belief "that the God with whom, starting from the hither side of our own extramarginal self, we come at its remoter margin into commerce, should be the absolute world-ruler"; but also, and more significantly, when he writes the following (quoted also by Rorty, disapprovingly):

> Religion, in her fullest exercise of function, is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given, not a mere passion, like love, which views things in a rosier light. It is indeed that, as we have seen abundantly. But it is something more, namely, a postulator of new FACTS as well. The world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, a natural constitution different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required (1902: 463).

Moreover, the two alternative systems are in a broad sense "epistemic", for James thinks that the believers' beliefs are somewhat legitimate, justified, though they rest on entirely different grounds (or reasons) from the non-believers' beliefs. This, as is well-known, is one of the main claims put forward by James in *The Will to Believe*, but the same claim can be found in the *Varieties*, for example when James describes Tolstoy's conversion as something justified, rather than genetically explained, by religious experiences. All the book is an attempt to describe the variety of such religious experiences, conceived of as special, not-ordinary grounds to believe. "Special", "not-ordinary": that is, strictly speaking, neither empirical nor logical.

As a pragmatist, James is an anti-foundationalist, and this is enough to conclude that in his view one system of beliefs is not more correct than the other one (or perhaps: one set of standards of justification is not more correct than the other).

However, the claim that, according to James, believers and non-believers understand each other, at least in part, requires a bit more elaboration. One

might think that, since James speaks of mysticism, we should conclude that the believers' grounds are entirely unintelligible for non-believers. If this were the case, James would not be an epistemic relativist in the sense employed in this paper. However, we should not draw this conclusion too quickly. First, even of mystical states, it is somewhat possible to speak, though only indirectly (1902: 342). Secondly, in James' view there are different grades of mysticism: as it were, different steps on the "mystical ladder", from the less mysterious and more intelligible ones to the more mysterious and almost unintelligible. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, James clearly states that religious experiences can be partly or even entirely not-mystical: the book describes plenty of them. In the *Introduction* he expressly uses the word "intelligible" to characterize the account of a religious experience given by a religious believer (12). Finally, even though believers and non-believers understand each other (at least to a certain extent), in cases of religious "disagreement" rational persuasion is excluded, since religious belief is based on experiences that come when they come, like unexpected gifts. This is shown, for example, in the description given by James of the experience he calls "the passion of love", which (together with other experiences) provided Tolstoy with grounds to believe: "The passion of love is the most familiar and extreme example of this fact. If it comes, it comes; if it does not come, no process of reasoning can force it". And the same for "fear, […] indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the excited interest which these passions put into the world is our gift to the world, just so are the passions themselves GIFTS – gifts to us, from sources sometimes low and sometimes high; but almost always nonlogical and beyond our control" (141).

The last point I would like to make in this paper, and that which I shall focus upon in what follows, is that the kind of (partly implicit) epistemic relativism which I have just attributed to James in the *Varieties* can also be found in Wittgenstein's later remarks on religious belief. Wittgenstein makes a distinction between two kinds of religious believers. The paradigmatic case of the former kind of believer is, once again, Tolstoy (Wittgenstein 1998: 84; 1966: 56); the paradigmatic case of the latter kind of believer is that Father O'Hara who in 1930 took part in a symposium on *Science and Religion*: "one of those people who make it [i.e., religion] a question of science" (Wittgenstein 1966: 57), a superstitious, rather than religious, man, whose beliefs are misleadingly based on allegedly rational and empirical evidence (59). Interestingly enough, both James and Wittgenstein have the same extremely negative, vehement attitude towards this latter kind of believers, and for the same reasons. Wittgenstein says that what was "ludicrous about O'Hara" was "his making it appear to

be reasonable" (58), whereas on the contrary we should definitely call him "superstitious" and "unreasonable" (59). In James' thought a role similar to that of Wittgenstein's O'Hara is somewhat played by W.K. Clifford, who had a similarly narrow view of what a justified belief could be (though, of course, it is likely that Clifford did not share any O'Hara's religious beliefs). In the *Varieties* James writes: "I CAN, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W.K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name…" (James 1902: 463).

Wittgenstein's epistemic relativism arises from his conviction that there is a gulf between the Tolstoy kind of believer and a non-believer (Tripodi 2013, on which the following interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of religious belief is largely based). For example, when the former, but not the latter, believes in the Last Judgement, they do not believe the same thing, but – as Wittgenstein (1966: 55) puts it – they do not believe different things either. Their distance from one another is so great that there cannot be a real disagreement between them. It is worth noting, here, that in Wittgenstein's view the gulf between Tolstoy and the non-believer does not have a *linguistic* nature. In his 1938 lectures, Wittgenstein explicitly rejected the idea that there is linguistic incommensurability between the two alternative systems of beliefs. He presented as follows the view according to which the gulf between believers and non-believers is to be explicated in terms of linguistic incommensurability: "It isn't a question of my [as a non-believer] being anywhere near him [the Tolstoy kind of believer], but on an entirely different plane, which you could express by saying: 'You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein'" (1966: 53). And he immediately rejected it: "The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of meaning" (53). This entails – as Wittgenstein made clear in the incipit of the *Blue Book* – that the difference in question might not be a difference of meaning at all (1958: 1). Moreover, and more importantly, Wittgenstein did not replace the *Tractatus* doctrine that religious truths are ineffable with an expressivist view of religious beliefs, according to which credal statements have the apparent form of descriptive assertions but, in fact, are nothing but expressions of certain emotional and behavioral attitudes (see Braithwaite 1971 and Nielsen 2005 for a different interpretation). In other words, adapting the Rortyan vocabulary seen above: Wittgenstein never accepted a purely pragmatist and reductive view of religious beliefs; according to him, credal statements say what they say, rather than what is said by reductive translations of their words. This interpretation is supported by several passages in Wittgenstein's later remarks on religious belief. There are remarks in which Wittgenstein

appears to take religious beliefs at face value. For example: "If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being. He is dead and decomposed. In that case he is a teacher, like any other & can no longer help; & we are once more orphaned & alone" (1998: 38). And there are also passages in which he rejects the expressivist account of the linguistic gulf between believers and non-believers. For example, in the 1938 lectures on religious belief he discussed the case in which "someone, before going to China, when he might never see me again, said to me: 'We might see one another after death'". At one point, Casimir Lewy, who attended the class, commented: "In this case, you might only mean that he expressed a certain attitude". Wittgenstein replied: "I would say 'No, it isn't the same as saying 'I'm very fond of you' – and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?" (1966, 70-1). Thus, he expressly rejected the reduction of credal statements in terms of sentences that express attitudes (Schroeder 2007: 446; Kusch 2011). Something similar happened in a discussion with one of his Catholic pupils, namely, Yorick Smythies. When Wittgenstein remarked that by employing a sentence such as "God's eye sees everything", a believer associates a particular use with a picture, Smythies reacted, being worried by Wittgenstein's proposing a reduction of religion in non-religious terms. Wittgenstein, in turn, replied passionately:

> Rubbish. I meant: what conclusions are you going to draw? etc. Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God? 'He could just as well have said so and so'—this [remark] is foreshadowed by the word 'attitude'. He couldn't just as well have said something else. If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions. Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use? (1966: 71).

In a similar way as James, Wittgenstein seemed to regard reductionism (as well as dogmatism and anti-pluralism) not as an unsuitable philosophical view among others, but rather as the most serious philosophical sin.

Wittgenstein is an epistemic relativist because he thinks that the gulf between Tolstoy and a non-believer is epistemological rather than linguistic. He draws an epistemological distinction between the evidence of the heart, which provides grounds for religious belief, and rational and empirical evidence, which provides grounds for our ordinary, scientific, and philosophical beliefs. He also thinks that the two kinds of grounds lead to incompatible conclusions (1998: 89). Tolstoy's religious beliefs, Wittgenstein tells us, are based "on evidence which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy" (1966: 57-8), where "taken in one way" seems to mean the same as "taken in the in the ordinary sense", that is, as logical or empirical evidence. And he explicitly stresses

that the controversies between a Tolstoy kind of believer and a non-believer "look quite different from any normal controversies" because "*reasons* look entirely different from normal *reasons*" (1966: 55-56, italics mine). Religious belief cannot be the result of ordinary evidence: even ordinary indubitability would not be enough in that case (1966: 57; 1998: 61).

In Wittgenstein's view, only experiences such as passion and love can bring about such a radical change in one's life (1998: 61; see also 38-39). According to him, religious experiences such as passion, love, despair, the perception of failure, melancholy, the recognition of sin (and all the varieties of religious experience described by James in his book) provide the believer with reasons to believe (though such reasons "look entirely different from normal reasons"). For instance, "the wonder at the existence of the world" can bring faith by making one inclined to say, "how extraordinary that anything should exist" (1993: 41); "the experience of feeling absolutely safe" can bring faith by making one inclined to say "I'm safe, whatever happens" (Malcolm 1984: 58); the experience of distress and absolute loneliness can make one lose "his dignity as someone special & so become like a child" (1998: 52), so as to start feeling the need of God's help, and so forth. It is worth noting, here, that though, as James puts it, when the religious belief comes, it comes (like a gift), we are somewhat *free* to accept or reject certain experiences as grounds for believing, or so it seems (Wittgenstein 1998: 35). This is a further reason to conceive of such basic religious experiences as reasons, rather as mere causes, of religious belief.

Similarly to James, Wittgenstein thinks that the believer's grounds are partly opaque to the non-believer (1966: 56), but he is also convinced that a sensitive non-believer (like Wittgenstein himself or perhaps like James, for example) has a partial but quite deep understanding of the believer's grounds. He also agrees with James that there are different degrees of religiosity and, accordingly, different levels of understanding of religious matters (Wittgenstein 1998: 37). For a non-believer, understanding the believer's reasons is extremely difficult, rather than impossible (37, 84).

As in the case of James' *Varieties*, in Wittgenstein's later remarks on religious belief we find all the ingredients of a sort of epistemic relativism: two alternative and incompatible systems of beliefs, based on entirely different kinds of reasons, so that the gulf between the two systems is epistemological, rather than linguistic; moreover, non-believers cannot rationally persuade believers, though they understand each other, at least in part. As it happens with James, however, this is not to say that epistemic relativism is one of Wittgenstein's explicit philosophical goals, let alone that he defends a relativistic *theory* of religious beliefs. Rather, as in James, epistemic relativism can be seen as a by-product of his deeply rooted and fundamental philosophical atti-

tudes, namely, pluralism, anti-reductionism, anti-dogmatism. Of course, epistemic relativism is, in both Wittgenstein and James, a *contingent* by-product of their pluralism and anti-reductionism, for in principle one can be a pluralist and an anti-reductionist without being a relativist, or so it seems; nonetheless, as I hope to have shown in this paper, it is an interesting by-product, which is worth investigating.

Paolo Tripodi
paolo.tripodi@unito.it
University of Turin

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