Wittgenstein, On Certainty and Religion

July 28th

18:00–18:10 – Welcome

18:10–19:10 – *Keynote* Pritchard: Honest Doubt: Quasi-Fideism and Epistemic Vertigo

19:20–19:50 – Bagheri Noaparast: Quasi-fideism and Epistemic Relativism

19:50–20:20 – Bottone: Wittgenstein's copy of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*

20:20–20:50 – Vinten: Wittgenstein, Religion, and Deep Epistemic Injustice

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10:00–10:30 – Stickney: Remarks on Religion in Wittgenstein's Later, Post-foundational Philosophy: Surveying Grounds for Opposing Reactions to Spiritual Practices and Mystical Experience

10:30-11:30 – *Keynote* Schönbaumsfeld: Passionate Commitment to a System of Reference

11:40–12:10 – Moro «A miracle is, as it were, a gesture which God makes». On the Metaphor of Gesture in Wittgenstein

12:10–12:40 – O'Hara: Some Difficulties in Identifying Basic Religious Certainties

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Book of Abstracts

28th July

Duncan Pritchard - Honest Doubt: Quasi-Fideism and Epistemic Vertigo

In his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein articulated a radical conception of the structure of reasons, such that all rational evaluation essentially presupposes arational *hinge commitments*. I have argued elsewhere that such an account has application to the epistemology of religious belief by generating a distinctive proposal that I call *quasi-fideism*. Quasi-fideism seems to fare better than competing views in terms of capturing the phenomenology of at least a certain kind of fundamental religious commitment, particularly in terms of its visceral certainty and its associated resistance to ordinary rational considerations. And yet this apparent strength might also be thought to be in other respects a weakness. For can it not also be an important ingredient of the religious life--even the deeply religious life--that it involves religious doubt? But how is that to be squared with thinking of fundamental religious commitments in terms arational hinge certainties? I think the answer to this puzzle lies in a proper understanding of how such doubt can be a genuine manifestation of the (reflective) religious life rather than being inimical to it. Following Tennyson, I call this phenomenon *honest doubt*. With honest doubt so understood, it aligns with an important kind of intellectual anxiety that naturally arises in the context of a Wittgensteinian epistemology: *epistemic vertigo*. Far from being in tension with quasi-fideism, honest doubt, *qua* religious epistemic vertigo, is uniquely accommodated by this proposal.

Zoheir Bagheri Noaparast - Quasi-fideism and Epistemic Relativism

According to Duncan Pritchard, his version of hinge epistemology is not susceptible to epistemic relativism. Pritchard argues that 1) there are sufficient shared hinge commitments and 2) there exists a shared 'overarching certainty' that "we are not radically and fundamentally mistaken." He refers to the latter as über hinge commitment. Pritchard has also applied hinge epistemology to religion and defended a view he calls quasi-fideism. It will be argued that within some religious frameworks, Pritchard's über hinge commitment cannot be considered groundless. While theistic religious frameworks offer justification for why we are not systematically deceived, other polytheistic religious frameworks may lead to agnosticism regarding the reliability of our perceptions and cognitive abilities. Consequently, Pritchard's quasi-fideism may need to limit itself to non-supernatural religions or introduce criteria for religious frameworks that can be aligned with hinge epistemology and those that cannot.

Angelo Bottone - Wittgenstein's copy of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*

The question of whether Ludwig Wittgenstein read John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent* has long remained unresolved, despite its relevance to understanding the evolution of Wittgenstein's later epistemological thought. While scholars have often speculated about Wittgenstein's familiarity with Newman, especially in relation to *Grammar of Assent*, the available evidence has been ambiguous and frequently contradictory. This paper addresses the debate by presenting conclusive evidence that Wittgenstein not only read the *Grammar of Assent* but discussed it with his students.

The paper begins by contextualizing the question within existing scholarship, noting how various testimonies from Wittgenstein's students and interpreters, such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Maurice Drury, Norman Malcolm, and Yorick Smythies, offer conflicting claims. Anscombe, for example, denies that Wittgenstein read *Grammar of Assent*, while others recall him referencing or discussing the text. The paper then reviews scattered textual evidence, including Wittgenstein's letter to Rush Rhees in 1944, in which he mentions reading "two books of Newman's," and his reference to "Cardinal Newman" in a 1946 Cambridge lecture. The first note in *On Certainty* also cites a "curious remark by H. Newman," though the identity of the Newman in question (John Henry or Max) has remained uncertain.

The central contribution of this paper lies in the first public presentation of a key piece of evidence: a copy of *Grammar of Assent* bearing a personal dedication from Wittgenstein to his student Casimir Lewy. The book, now held in the library of the University of Oviedo, contains the inscription: "To Dr. C. Lewy, to remind him of a case in which I wronged him. L. Wittgenstein." This volume, was likely given to Lewy after he received his PhD in 1943, making it a late entry in Wittgenstein's life and reflecting his serious engagement with the text.

The paper explores the intellectual relationship between Wittgenstein and Lewy, the latter's own references to Newman, and the possible significance of the dedication. It also traces the provenance of the book, from Lewy's private library to its acquisition by the University of Oviedo. The conclusion reflects on how this evidence alters the prevailing view of Wittgenstein's relationship to Newman and reopens fruitful avenues for reinterpreting *On Certainty* and Wittgenstein's views on religious belief, doubt, and assent.

This discovery decisively resolves a long-standing scholarly question and invites a reassessment of Newman's place within the intellectual framework of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Robert Vinten - Wittgenstein, Religion, and Deep Epistemic Injustice

In his article 'Epistemic injustice and religion', Ian James Kidd raises the possibility that some epistemic injustices might be deep in the sense that "the very possibility of credibility or intelligibility is removed, and… this can result from adoption by an epistemic agent of a certain worldview" (Kidd, 2017, 393). To spell out exactly what might be involved in deep epistemic injustices, especially those involving religious worldviews, an obvious place to look is

Wittgenstein's work on religion. For example, in his 'Lectures on Religious Belief' Wittgenstein talks about the "enormous gulf" that exists between someone who believes in a Last Judgement and a person who says "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly" (Wittgenstein, 53). Moreover, careful reflection on Wittgenstein's remarks in the 'Lectures on Religious Belief' and his late work collected in *On Certainty* will have implications for how we are to understand the relationships between belief and evidence (OC, §§162, 185, 201-4) and for the ways in which we might enrich our hermeneutical sensitivities and so Wittgenstein's remarks are helpful for understanding epistemic injustices more generally. This paper will focus on epistemic injustices involving Islamophobia, since Islamophobia is given little attention in the literature on epistemic injustice, despite the fact that it is plausibly the most prevalent and consequential form of racism and discrimination on the basis of religion in the world today.

29th July

Jeff Stickney – Remarks on Religion in Wittgenstein's Later, Post-foundational Philosophy: Surveying Grounds for Opposing Reactions to Spiritual Practices and Mystical Experience

This paper started out as a broad Danto-type survey of Wittgenstein's scattered remarks on all things spiritual, across his early and later writings. Forster (2004) did this with Wittgenstein's conflicting remarks on the ambiguity of grammar, Cerbone (2024) with realism versus idealism, and I (2018/2023) with different registers in his use of the concept of learning. Reflecting now on Wittgenstein's "Collection of Nonsense," his personal letters and lecture notes on religion, I consider why he was so deeply conflicted on the topic of religion, but not so much as to decide the reasons in his case as in my own.

What I address here, more concisely, is something that emerges as a possibility from reading Wittgenstein's later post-foundationalism and anti-verificationism, starting in the lectures on religion but more developed in the *Investigations*: the realization that the degree of certainty and the types of evidence are relative to the kind of language-game being played, without then collapsing into epistemic or cultural relativism. This tension comes out in his defence of animist rituals from the scrutiny of scientific reductionism in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," and mostly importantly in *On Certainty* with the comparison between physics and animism, without then leading us into an 'isles of language' reading of Wittgenstein that leaves us isolated in our separate communities.

But returning to the problem of some people(s) being conflicted in their responses, I explore the notion that one can be alternately *hinged* in their immediate, second-nature reactions to spiritual utterances or practices due to early inculcation into opposing sets of practices or language-games. Instead of bedrock certainties being monolithic (as one might gather from or project into their reading of the riverbed analogy in OC §§94-98), it might also be composed of various fragments from different worldviews or world-pictures, such as in conglomerate rock

formations like breccia. Brecciation allows for the possibility of persons or even entire communities having in their cultivated background opposing hinges/scaffolding, or alternate ways of immediately reacting to stimuli. I shared this idea in my keynote at the joint British Wittgenstein Society & PESGB meeting at UCL in 2018, applying it to cases of climate science denial which include alternate reactions to the concept of geologic time as well as hinges to evolution versus creationism. I also shared in the Q&A that my parents were both Christian Scientists who believed in faith healing while working at the early NASA in the 1950s. In keeping with Wittgenstein's style, my inquiry includes a confessional investigation of myself. Using first-hand cases though immanent critique is a more honest (and risky) approach than inventing bizarre hypothetical cases (as in his early "Lecture on Ethics", with a person sprouting a lion's head as a testcase mysterious event). Not abandoning thought-experiments, his later approach attends more closely to plausible cases of early childhood acculturation and training, which can, and in my case did include initiation into brecciated, scientific and religious unfounded-foundations for sorting sense from nonsense. Without indulgence, I briefly share a few wonders that trouble my ordinarily rational and scientific mind, opening me to mysteries I cannot explain but that upon ethical reflection invite more respect for those who dwell more fully within religious forms of life.

Genia Schönbaumsfeld - Passionate Commitment to a System of Reference

In this paper I discuss one of the most well-known and most frequently misunderstood passages from *Culture and Value* – the one where Wittgenstein says that religious belief can only be something like passionate commitment to a system of reference. I argue that the notion that religious belief is more like the acceptance of a 'hinge-framework' than the adoption of an isolated intellectual belief has profound implications for the grammar of the word 'God', as well as the question of how religious belief can be acquired. I propose that Wittgenstein's conception can fruitfully be understood as a type of virtue-based account where the reasons that someone can have for their religious belief (*Glaube*) depends on the development of their spiritual capacities. This will enable us to see why passionate commitment to a system of reference, although not evidence-based in any ordinary sense, is nevertheless not just 'brute conviction'.

Sandro Moro - «A miracle is, as it were, a gesture which God makes». On the Metaphor of Gesture in Wittgenstein

The famous proposition 6.522 of the Tractatus is well-known, in which Wittgenstein assures us that «There is indeed the inexpressible», and that it shows itself and is the mystical.

Less known is his later intensification - beginning around 1935 - of a peculiar use of the metaphor of the gesture. Whenever he encounters something he believes language cannot adequately describe, he suggests considering it "like a gesture."

The gesture, in its expressive immediacy, becomes a metaphor for attempting to communicate the inexpressible. It is not explained but recognized, much like the expression on a face or the tone of a voice. This idea is reflected in Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief: religion is not a system of verifiable or falsifiable propositions but a way of life, something that shows itself in the concrete existence of believers.

Wittgenstein exhibits a profound distrust in language's ability to fully express certain dimensions of human experience. The metaphor of the gesture thus becomes his privileged tool for revealing what the Tractatus called the Ineffable. Like a melody or a gaze, a gesture does not say something but shows a meaning that words cannot capture. This applies to religious belief, which, for Wittgenstein, is not about accepting theological statements but about adopting an existential attitude that escapes theoretical formalization.

Following the distinction between saying and showing, we can understand the religious only if we see it not as a set of doctrines, but as a lived experience. Wittgenstein writes of «a particular atmosphere round the seeing and speaking» (Ts-310,155, LM, II, §22, p. 226), an imponderable evidence just as «subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone» (RF, II, XI, p. 298). Thus, religious expressions are not empirical propositions but grammatical propositions that function as the hinges of a form of life. Any attempt to reduce them to a theory would be as futile as trying to construct an aesthetic or ethical theory.

In this sense, the meaning of faith does not lie in the words used to formulate it but in how it shows itself in life. Wittgenstein invites us to approach the religious as one would a gesture: not as something to be 1 Ms-128,47 explained, but as something that shows itself and can only be recognized in its immediacy. However, this does not condemn us to silence, as the warning of the seventh proposition of the Tractatus seemed to suggest, because we can, in fact, speak about what surrounds the gesture. As he writes in Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology:

> «The question is really: are these notes not the best expression for what is expressed here? Presumably. But that does not mean that they aren't to be explained by working on their surrounding » (OFP, I, §36).

Neil O'Hara - Some Difficulties in Identifying Basic Religious Certainties

There are several candidates for how to understand 'hinges', even in a Wittgensteinian sense. I will focus on a relatively uncontroversial characteristic of hinges – their being historically located. This is not to take a purely contextualist reading of hinges (for which see for example Hermann (2015) or Timmons (1996)), though I will benefit from contextualist insights. The aim of the paper will be first to give a reminder that any potential religious hinge worth discussion, should be one (or some cluster) that has been held by real historical people, at some real historical time. And I advocate a move towards a method, or attitude, exemplified by Mikel Burley (2020) and by Victoria Lavorerio (2018). This attitude counsels attention away from

reified single propositions of philosophical theology (such as 'God exists'), towards thick descriptions of lived beliefs seen in clusters and in historical context.

A key outcome of this shift in attitude and attention is to see how difficult it is to identify examples of religious hinges. As Neil O'Hara (2018 & 2022) points out, religious certainties, as historical artefacts, take time, space and (some kind of) isolation to form. So, the first difficulty amounts to finding cultures that have experienced this kind of extended isolation, and have also preserved the right kinds of evidence for their beliefs. The solution here will be a much greater attention to interdisciplinary work, especially with historians of religion and anthropologists.

On the other hand, while the religious hinges of others are hard to see because of their distance, our own are obscured by their nearness. Our own *moral* hinges, for example, necessarily appear as unconditioned and universal (e.g. our belief in the wrongness of child marriages). This may make it difficult for us to identify our own hinges, religious and otherwise, as historical, localised artefacts. Two further factors, the object and the oughts of religious belief in Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, may also have a distorting effect. More explicitly, these are i), that the object of religious belief as conceived in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, is universal, transcendent and ahistorical; and ii) particularly in Christian and Islamic traditions, religious belief (and sometimes religious 'certainty') has been a matter of the strongest (universal) moral obligation. I argue that these are two potential causes for the tendency against noticing the particular and historical nature of religious hinges.

David Ellis - From Surface to Depth: Resolving Two Problems in the Grammar of Belief

In *Between Knowledge and Certainty*, I argued that Wittgenstein's distinction between knowledge and certainty is not just epistemological but grammatical (Ellis 2025). This paper revisits that claim in light of two potential challenges: first, that a statement can express certainty only if it expresses a true knowledge claim; second, that belief-in God's existence depends on belief-that God exists. I argue these are not genuine epistemological problems, but grammatical misunderstandings resulting from a failure to distinguish surface from depth grammar.