On Wittgenstein’s View of Religion in “Ueber Gewissheit (On Certainty)”

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1 The point of this paper

In this paper I would like to examine how people have religious faith in the present day when scientific knowledge is dominant. I want to use Wittgenstein’s arguments in “Ueber Gewissheit” as a clue to examine this problem.

In “Ueber Gewissheit” Wittgenstein examines a problem of world-pictures (Weltbild) in various ways. A world-picture is a system of fundamental beliefs about the world which members of a certain cultural community have in common (Wittgenstein, §102). According to him, there have been many world-pictures, for example, a scientific one that many people in the present day, also Wittgenstein himself, have, religious ones that believers of different religions have had, and mythical ones that primitive people have had.

On one side, Wittgenstein insists that a difference in these world-pictures is fundamental and that it is impossible to understand one another.

If this argument is proper, it becomes difficult to understand that people who rely on scientific knowledge which includes a scientific world-picture can also have religious faith which entails a religious world-picture.

But, on the other side, Wittgenstein recognizes that people who share scientific knowledge with Wittgenstein have religious faith too. If this second argument is proper, scientific knowledge may be compatible with various
world-pictures.

Wittgenstein doesn’t develop the second argument actively, and his emphasis is put on the first argument which rather denies the second argument.

I would like to examine a possible development of the second argument with using the language game theory which is Wittgenstein’s tool of arguments. I pay attention to difference of language games between knowing which is essential to having scientific knowledge and believing which is essential to having a world-picture.

Moreover, there are two distinct kinds of believing, one is ‘belief’ which is to believe ordinary things in the widest sense, and the other is ‘faith’ which is to believe religious things. I would like to examine this distinction too.

2 Believing and knowing

Generally speaking, many people think that belief means imperfect knowledge and therefore is inferior to knowledge. For example, Plato thought that ‘episteme’ which means perfect knowledge is improvement from ‘doxa’ which means belief, opinion, or imperfect knowledge (Plato, p. 186, [478 c]).

In “Kritik der Reinen Vernunft (Criticism of Pure Reason)”, Kant also divides ‘Fuerwahrhalten’ which means believing in the broadest sense into three grades. They are ‘Meinen’ (opinion, doxa), ‘Glauben’ (belief, faith) and ‘Wissen’ (knowledge) (Kant, p. 741, [B 850]). Kant asserts that ‘Glauben’ (belief in the ordinary sense) means subjectively sufficient believing and is conviction only for one person. He insists that knowledge means both subjectively and objectively sufficient believing and is conviction for all people.

Wittgenstein makes objection against such a view that belief means imperfect knowledge. To argue the problem, Wittgenstein uses Moore’s ‘Defense
of Common Sense" in which the problem of true, certain knowledge, or obvious truisms is developed.

Moore insists that he has a list of obvious truisms, which are a set of propositions, every one of which he knows, with certainty, to be true (Moore, p. 32). As examples of such propositions, Moore states, "There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continually ever since, though not without undergoing changes. ...The earth had existed also for many years before my body was born (Moore, p. 33).

Therefore Moore may be able to state, "I know that here is my hand," but Wittgenstein criticizes that this statement is strange. Wittgenstein states, "Now do I, in the course of my life, make sure I know that here is a hand---my own hand? (Wittgenstein, §9)". He points out that Moore's statement is a statement that isn't used in a suitable situation in a daily life. Wittgenstein criticizes that Moore uses a sentence 'I know that... ' wrongly.

Wittgenstein says, "'I know' often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement (Wittgenstein, §18)." When doubt as to someone's statement takes place, the sentence is used as a language game of declaring that he has a preparation of giving grounds. However, Moore's statement "Here is my own hand" is a statement to which we can say "There is no room for doubt in this case (Wittgenstein, §58)" or "I am of the unshakable conviction in this case (Wittgenstein, §86)." Because no doubt takes place about this statement, the sentence "I know" can't be used suitably, or meaningfully in this case.

The various statements which Moore enumerates are not statements which have been got as results of the search (= knowledge), but statements which have been believed as absolutely solid convictions (= beliefs). Doubt and enquiry can take place meaningfully on the grounds of such unshakable beliefs.
Therefore we shouldn’t regard such unshakable beliefs as imperfect knowledge. Wittgenstein points out that there are beliefs as absolutely solid convictions, and reverses the supposed relation between knowledge and belief, which is usually understood that knowledge is more solid than belief.

This Wittgenstein’s argument shows a philosophical tendency in the first half of the twentieth century which we can see also in Husserl. Husserl points out that natural scientific knowledge is grounded on subjective unshakable beliefs as to Lebenswelt (the daily world, in which we perceive and practice) (Husserl, §9). Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who was a Japanese educator and philosopher, also thinks that people’s trust in natural scientific knowledge is based on their beliefs in laws of ordinary life which are not precise but frequently perceived (Makiguchi, p. 233ff).

3 A world-picture as a system of beliefs

Wittgenstein points out that knowledge is based on beliefs as absolutely solid convictions. Such beliefs don’t exist separately. He states, “My convictions do form a system, a structure (Wittgenstein, §102),” or, “When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions (Wittgenstein, §141).” He names a system of various propositions expressing such solid convictions a world-picture (Weltbild). When he states, “The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology (Wittgenstein, §95),” he suggests the relation between a world-picture and religion.

Wittgenstein points out that a world-picture is different from scientific hypotheses which we can get as results of intellectual search. Wittgenstein states, “I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned
Beliefs which compose the contents of a world-picture are ‘groundless’ (Wittgenstein, §166) and ‘have no justification’ (Wittgenstein, §175). Rather they are beliefs which justification relies on, and which ‘form the starting-point of other beliefs’ (Wittgenstein, §209). As for beliefs which compose a world-picture, Wittgenstein thinks that the language game of saying true or false isn’t applicable. He insists that a world-picture is the substratum of all enquiring and asserting (Wittgenstein, §162).

How is such a world-picture acquired? Wittgenstein states, “I did not get my world-picture by satisfying myself of its correctness. It is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false (Wittgenstein, §94).” He also states, “‘We are quite sure of it’ does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education (Wittgenstein, §298).” He points out that a world-picture is given by cultural training in a cultural community.

4 Some different world-pictures, especially religious world-pictures

Wittgenstein states that a world-picture is formed in a cultural community. As there are some different cultural communities, it is natural that there are some different world-pictures. He gives some cases of different world-pictures. He states, “Men have judged that a king can make rain; we say this contradicts all experience. Today they judge that aeroplanes and the radio etc. are means for the closer contact of peoples and the spread of culture (Wittgenstein, §132).” He points out that a world-picture of primitives is different from ours.

As the cultural community of primitives is obviously different from ours, it is natural to think that there is difference between these two world-pictures. However Wittgenstein points out that there can be different world-pictures
among people who, we think, belong to the same cultural community. He states, "I believe that every human being has two human parents; but Catholics believe that Jesus only had a human mother. And other people might believe that there are human beings with no parents, and give no credence to all the contrary evidence. Catholics believe as well that in certain circumstances a wafer completely changes its nature, and at the same time that all evidence proves the contrary. And so if Moore said, 'I know that this is wine and not blood', Catholics would contradict him (Wittgenstein, §239)." He suggests that a world-picture which religious people in the present day have may be different from one which non-believers have.

What would happen among people who have different world-pictures? Wittgenstein states, "Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how we imagine this? Instead of the physicists, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitives.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? ---If we call this 'wrong', aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs (Wittgenstein, §609)? And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings (Wittgenstein, §610). Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic (Wittgenstein, §611)." Wittgenstein points out that the difference in the world-pictures brings hostile relations.

5 A change of a world-picture and persuasion

However, Wittgenstein points out that a person can have a different world-picture from one that is formed in the cultural community which he belongs to. He states, "I said I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give
him reasons? Certainly but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.) (Wittgenstein, §612)” He also states, “I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long... etc.—We should be trying to give him our world-picture. This would happen through a kind of persuasion (Wittgenstein, §262).” He points out that it is possible to make someone accept a new world-picture by persuasion.

About persuasion, Wittgenstein states, “Men have believed that they could make rain; why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way (Wittgenstein, §92).” He suggests that persuasion means training to look at the world in a different way.

When we persuade a child, persuasion will go most successfully. A child sometimes has a ridiculous belief. However, Wittgenstein states, “But a child will not ordinarily stick to such a belief and will soon be convinced by what we tell him seriously (Wittgenstein, §106).” Further he adds, “Isn’t this altogether like the way one can instruct a child to believe in a God, or that none exists, and it will accordingly be able to produce apparently telling grounds for the one or the other? (Wittgenstein, §107)”

In these cases Wittgenstein gives cases in which a superior person persuades an inferior person such as an adult persuades a child or a modern man who has scientific knowledge persuades a primitive man who doesn’t have such knowledge.
6 The possible coexistence of different world-pictures

When different world-pictures encounter, the conflict between them isn't always solved by the unilateral persuasion to the inferior from the superior. Wittgenstein states, "But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa. But is there no objective character here? Very intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former (Wittgenstein, §336)." Wittgenstein points out that there can be different world-pictures among people who have same intelligence and education and that there is no objective criterion about which world-picture is more reasonable.

We can obviously see the same assertion in the already quoted §239 where the difference of world-pictures between Catholicism believers and non-believers including Wittgenstein was stated. However I think that there is a strange point in Wittgenstein's argument. Wittgenstein states, "Catholics believe as well that in certain circumstances a wafer completely changes its nature, and the same time that all evidence proves the contrary. And so if Moore said 'I know that this is wine and not blood?, Catholics would contradict him (Wittgenstein, §239)." He suggests that there are different opinions about Catholicism's doctrine of substantial metamorphoses in blessed wafer (bread) and wine.

The Gospel states, "During supper he (Jesus) took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them, with the words: 'Take this; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them; and they all drank from it. And he said,

'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many. I tell you this:
never again shall I drink the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it
new in the kingdom of God (Mark, p. 63, [14.22]).” Apostles might believe
the words of Jesus literally, and they might drink blessed wine as holy blood
of Jesus with being immersed in religious emotion.

How would Jesus have answered if anyone of them had argued at that time,
“It is wine, and not blood. Because it has no smell which is characteristic of
blood”? Of course such a thing isn’t described in the Bible. The language
game in which such an objection was made might not have existed because
the Judaism had also religious taboos of meals in those days.

However, Catholicism’s doctrine of substantial metamorphoses was
formed in the social and cultural conditions which allowed the language
game in which such an objection could be made. Though the doctrine recog-
nized that in apparent nature blessed wine remained the same wine, in sub-
stantial nature which we could not know, it insisted that blessed wine
changed into holy blood. Both believers and non-believers had the same opin-
ion at least about apparent nature of blessed wine.

Therefore, when a non-believer insists, “This is wine, and not blood.”, a
believer may say, “It’s right. This is wine, and not human blood.” In this
case, the difference in the opinion such as Wittgenstein presumes won’t be
formed.

Then, a difference in these two opinions is formed only about the doctrine
of substantial metamorphoses which can’t be explained by the believer as
well. A believer believes that blessed wine changes into holy blood (not
human blood) by substantial metamorphoses, and a non-believer doesn’t
believe anything about such substantial metamorphoses.

What must be understood in this case is that a believer believes that drink-
ing blessed wine in the mass is religiously important ceremony that leads to
final relief. In other words, substantial metamorphoses are believed in the
religious terms. Therefore, about substantial metamorphoses, a believer never thinks what kind of change they are, for example, physical change or chemical change. When we inquire such a problem, it is to confuse a language game of the scientific search with that of religious faith.

Ordinarily it will be never troublesome for a non-believer only if a believer recognizes that blessed wine is in apparent nature the same wine. For a non-believer apparent nature of wine is concerned chiefly. Also a further thing will be out of question for a believer only if drinking blessed wine in the mass leads to final relief. It is not important to know whether the apparent nature of blessed wine is this or that and whether substantial nature can be explained well to a non-believer or not.

In this case believing in religious ideas should be distinguished from belief such as believing “Here is my hand.” A believer who believes in substantial metamorphoses may admit that a non-believer does not believe in them. However a person who believes that “Here is my hand” would not admit that anyone does not believe it. In this point the difference between religious faith and ordinary belief can’t be overlooked. Therefore I think that Wittgenstein’s argument about beliefs is insufficient.

Moreover, as for the description of the Genesis in the Old Testament, it is not so easy to say that there should be difference about the creation of the world between a believer and a non-believer as Wittgenstein says.

Pascal thought that the Genesis described the historical facts about the creation of the world by God. So he calculated the date of world creation on the base of the Genesis. Therefore he was worried about contradiction between the date of the Genesis and the date of Chinese history described in “The History of China”, and he finally denied the date of Chinese history (Pascal, p. 595, [§593]). Today the date of Chinese history is acknowledged roughly true by many scholars, so Pascal was false. This case of Pascal shows the atti-
tude which regards the Bible as a book of historical description.

But, can't we interpret the Bible in another way? Today some people think that the Genesis expresses religiously that the world and all creatures in the world are all created by God, therefore they are all precious things, and that God gave human beings the responsibility to protect them. In this interpretation of the Genesis there is no reference to the historical facts about when and how God created the world and creatures. So the Genesis doesn't contradict the assertions in the contemporary astronomy.

Here is a certain opinion about the problem of truth. I think that even if in certain cultural and social conditions the world creation by God narrated in the Genesis is believed literally as historical facts, so long as there are no other competitive ideas about the world creation, then the belief in the Genesis is not false. Because in these conditions there is no criterion which decides whether the descriptions in the Genesis are true or not.

However, if in other conditions there are different opinions about the world creation, the assertion that God created the world as described in the Genesis can be objected. Therefore a problem whether the assertion is true or not would take place, and in some conditions where, for example, natural science is dominant, the assertion may be decided as false. In this case some people may change the interpretation about the Genesis and think that it doesn't refer to historical facts but refer to human beings' responsibility in religious way.

However others may believe in the Genesis literally and they deny the opinions of contemporary astronomy. This faith may cause many troubles in such cultural and social conditions. If someone wants to continue a religious life without troubles, then he may try to find a new interpretation which doesn't contradict dominant ideas.

I think that the history of religions shows many cases in which people have changed their interpretations about the scriptures and continued their reli-
gious lives with new interpretations. In Wittgenstein's argument in "Ueber Gewissheit" there are many cases in which he states difference, friction and unilateral persuasion of world-pictures. But he doesn't think cases in which someone encounters a different world-picture and changes interpretations about some parts of his own world-picture, so the person tries to make his own world-picture compatible with new one. We Japanese have had such experiences several times.

For human beings religion is a time-honored world-picture which has been handed down from time immemorial. Religious world-pictures have played an important part in explanation of human life and death and in evaluation of social behavior and so on. Indeed, natural scientific knowledge has increased in modern times and a new world-picture which is well suited to it has become dominant. However, there are some aspects of life with which the natural scientific world-picture does not cope well, for instance, in case of grief for the death of a member of one's family. In such aspects of life a religious world-picture may work better than a scientific one.

However, in order that a religious world-picture can work well, it should be compatible with a scientific one which is dominant in most aspects of life. If it fails, people who generally rely on science may not believe religion and become hostile to religion. However I think that such people may not live only from a scientific point of view. Sometimes they may feel beauty and goodness in nature, and yet natural science isn't interested in such phenomena. Therefore they sometimes act with relying on a natural scientific world-picture, but sometimes do not so. I think that religion can work better to make human beings happy and good, if religion changes to be better suited to science and if science and religion become complementary to each other.
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