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A Grammatical Investigation of Miracles

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Abstract: Wittgenstein claims that religious belief does not stand on evidence, that only those with a religious point of view can see an event as a miracle, and that experiencing a miracle can influence a person towards religious belief. This has the unusual outcome that a miracle can lead a person to God, but a miracle cannot be evidence of God. This also faces two challenges. First, if miracles can only be seen from a religious point of view, then suggesting that a miracle can influence a person towards religion implies that a person can see a miracle before having a religious point of view. Second, if religious belief is not based on evidence, then those who report believing because of evidence are confused about their beliefs in a way we would not expect. I argue that these are not challenges to Wittgenstein's account but symptoms of our misunderstanding of grammar and his distinction between relative and absolute miracles.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; miracles; religious belief; religious language; grammar

1. Introduction

Many disagreements between religious and non-religious people appear to be about facts. They disagree about what exists, what is true, and what evidence is available. Many religious people insist that their beliefs are based on evidence and that they would stop believing if that evidence was dismissed. Many refer to miracles as factual events that not only provide evidence of the truth of a religious belief but have the power to change a person's life towards religion. Wittgenstein responds differently: experiencing a miracle can be a reason for becoming religious, but not an evidential reason.

Wittgenstein thinks that when we treat religious sentences and beliefs as we treat scientific or historical ones, we soon discover that religion is not like science or history (Bird 2007, p. 73). Religious beliefs are not like ordinary beliefs, and the religious use of language is not like ordinary uses. Wittgenstein argues that it is not that the religious and non-religious share the exact same worldview but disagree about the facts they see, but rather that they have different forms of life and points of view and thus see some things differently. For Wittgenstein, miracles are not facts waiting to be seen but are experiences that are had when the facts are seen from a religious point of view. Therefore, when it comes to miracles, the difference between the religious and non-religious will not be seen if they were to count the number of facts in the world. The religious do not count more facts but see some *as* miracles. As people are not born with an innate ability to see facts *as* miracles, there must be an account of what brought about such an ability in some people. The question, then, is what can shape a life and point of view to allow a person to see the world this way. Several things can cause this, such as childhood upbringing or an experience of an extraordinary event like a miracle.[1] In this paper, I focus on the experience of a miracle as one plausible reason for developing a religious form of life and point of view and highlight two challenges it poses for Wittgenstein's account.

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First, how can experiencing a miracle bring about a religious form of life and point of view if having such things is a prerequisite for experiencing a miracle? Second, if Wittgenstein is right, why do so many religious people wrongly claim to believe because of the evidence miracles provide? I offer a deflationary response by arguing that these challenges result from our misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's work on grammar and miracles. In most views, a miracle is not a trivial event; when we label X a miracle, we imply something about the value of X. We imply that X is extraordinary, fortunate, important, or good. Thus, to understand what "miracle" means, we must grasp the sense of value that we associate with its use. Wittgenstein thinks two kinds of value, similar though distinct, are related to the concept of a miracle. This results in two senses of miracle being conflated because the two kinds of value are often conflated. Wittgenstein distinguishes relative values from absolute values, and associates each with the term "miracle". A relative value has its basis in facts and can always be expressed in a statement of fact, whereas this is not the case for absolute values. For example, when we describe a sharp knife as good, we value the knife *relative* to the fact that it is sharp and that a knife has the function of cutting. We would value the knife differently if the facts changed. An absolute value is valued precisely because it is independent of the facts; it is found in how facts are seen, not in the facts themselves. This makes absolute values trickier to grasp, but for now, we can say the phrase "in the hands of God" expresses it because it means that no matter what happens—*no matter how the facts change*—I am safe because God takes care of me. Having distinguished these two values, we can return to miracles and deflate both challenges.

I claim Wittgenstein distinguishes two senses of miracle because of the relative and absolute senses of value that they concern. Relative miracles are experiences of extraordinary factual events, and their value is found in relative terms. Absolute miracles are experiences when facts are viewed from a religious point of view, and their value is found in absolute terms. When we ordinarily talk about miracles, we tend to talk about relative miracles—we talk about extraordinary factual events that are physically observable, scientifically testable, and something we would believe based on evidence (Bolger and Coburn 2021, p. 12; Scott 2013, p. 143). An experience of such an event can be regarded as evidence of something extraordinary, and we can imagine how it could be a life-changing experience that shapes a person's life and point of view into a religious form. An experience of a relative miracle is thus one of several ways a person's form of life and point of view can be influenced towards religion, allowing them to view some facts *as* absolute miracles. This deflates both challenges. First, a religious point of view is a prerequisite for experiencing absolute miracles but not relative miracles, and an experience of the latter can allow for the experience of the former. Second, relative miracles and absolute miracles are commonly called "miracles" despite having different grammar, which causes confusion and leads to religious people saying that miracles *prove* God's existence.

To make this argument, I detail Wittgenstein's views on grammar, focusing on the distinction between surface and depth grammar. I apply this to his comments on miracles in *Lecture on Ethics*, *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief*, and *Culture and Value*. I conclude that the two challenges can be deflated, and that Wittgenstein thinks an absolute miracle is an experience of absolute value where the world is seen as a gesture of God.

2. Language Games and Forms of Life

It is not settled what exactly Wittgenstein takes "grammar" to mean. On the one hand, Anscombe reports that Wittgenstein claimed that what he meant by grammar is "the sort of stuff one learns at school when one learns grammar" (Anscombe 2011, p. 200). On the other hand, Anscombe also recognises that "people have found it very hard to believe this" (Anscombe 2011, p. 200). Indeed, some, like Forster and Schroeder claim that Wittgenstein

concedes that his use of "grammar" differs from conventional uses (Forster 2004, p. 17; Schroeder 2017, p. 254). It is not necessary to settle the debate in this paper, and it will suffice to outline some of Wittgenstein's core views. When thinking of grammar, we might think about how we indicate tense or turn a noun into a verb by adding "ing" to the end. Wittgenstein agrees that that is grammar, but he wants to highlight the *activity* of doing things with words in language and life (Hamilton 2014, p. 12). This latter feature gives a unique sense to Wittgenstein's "grammar". Wittgenstein likens language to a game, where the speaking of a language is the performance of an activity that has meaning on account of the game's rules (Wittgenstein 1994, §23). Just as moving a piece across a board is meaningful because of what it achieves in a game, what we say is meaningful because of its function in a language game.[2] To know what a word means is to know what the word *does*, and this requires us to examine the grammar of the language game (Forster 2004, p. 8).

Wittgenstein asks us to reflect on the "multiplicity of language-games" that happen when giving and obeying orders, reporting events, forming and testing a hypothesis, and praying (Wittgenstein 1994, §23). Giving and obeying orders is a language game in which further games take place, such as setting time limits or describing the locations of places. Prayer is also a language game that requires other games to be played, like asking questions and describing events. However, prayer is not the only religious language game—singing hymns, giving confessions, and describing miracles are also religious language games. Therefore, to understand what is meant when one talks about God's miracles, we must ask what language game is being played, and "the religious language game" is not a complete answer. This also tells us that we cannot guess how a word is used before knowing the context in which it is used, nor should we assume that how things look on the surface is the entirety of the matter (Wittgenstein 1994, §340).

Consider how different sentences express the same propositional meaning ("it is raining outside" and "outside it is raining") and how the same sentence expresses different propositional meanings (the sentence "I am hungry" has a different propositional meaning when you and I utter it). There is a difference between the expression of a proposition and the meaning of the expressed proposition, and this difference can be muddled up. This happens with activities in language games. Different actions can fulfil the same function (bowing, waving, and nodding as ways of greeting a person), and the same action can fulfil different functions (waving hello, waving goodbye, and waving for attention). This shows that different sentences can convey the same meaning, while the same sentence can convey different meanings. Hence, we cannot simply assume that if "God" appears to be used as a name, "performs" as a verb, and "miracle" as a noun, then "God performs miracles" must carry the same meaning as "Einstein performs experiments". The language game of giving and obeying orders seems the same when it is a judge setting a bond condition or a priest setting a penance, but what it *means* to give and obey orders differs.[3] This puts us in a good place to distinguish surface grammar from depth grammar, which is essential to understanding Wittgenstein's work on miracles.

Surface and Depth Grammar

Telling someone to "break a leg" can be understood as a friendly remark or a threat of serious bodily harm. In each case, the words are put to the same surface use—"break" is a verb and "leg" refers to a limb—so the difference in meaning must be accountable to a grammar beneath the surface. Surface grammar refers to the immediate impression we have of a word's use in discourse; depth grammar refers to what the language activity amounts to in a particular form of life, regardless of surface impressions (Wittgenstein 1994, §664). As grammar is how words relate and what we do when we use them in practice, surface grammar is our immediate impression of a word's use in a sentence and of the

language activity in life. It covers our ordinary language techniques, such as pointing at things and naming them or raising a hand and asking questions. Depth grammar refers to what it means to perform those activities in a given language game and form of life. Depth grammar requires us to adopt the point of view of the language-speaking community to consider what it means *for them* to use language in a given way. The person who has mastered a language game has mastered the skill of not simply reading surface grammar but reading depth grammar that tells what it means to perform such an activity in the language-speaking community's form of life. Wittgenstein believes there is a tension between the surface grammar and depth grammar of religious language.

Wittgenstein expresses this tension, writing, "the way you use the word "God" does not show *whom* you mean—but, rather, what you mean" (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 50e). The surface grammar of "God" is a name, and when read in sentences like "God performs miracles", we take the sentence to express a fact about the actions of the person named "God". We might think that what is meant by "God performs miracles" *pictures* who is being referred to—that is, what I picture when reading "God performs miracles" is who God, as a person, is. Wittgenstein observes that

> The word [God] is used like a word representing a person. God sees, rewards, etc. [. . .] If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of. (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 59)

If I follow the surface grammar of "God performs miracles" as I would follow "Einstein performs experiments", then I will answer questions about the truth of the former as I would answer about the truth of the latter. I will treat "God" as the name of a person I picture to exist in the world and "miracles" as actions the person performs. I will ask for evidence and try to find out if they exist. But Wittgenstein notes, these normal techniques fail. I would be a fool if I tried to *find out* if God exists by searching on Facebook; more still if I searched Instagram because Facebook is not very popular these days. I am a fool because I looked in the wrong way, and not knowing it, I doubled down on the wrong way.

For Wittgenstein, how we look for the object named God is not separate from how we understand the use of "God" as a name—the two are the same activity. We cannot deploy our surface grammar reading of language and refuse the associated method of looking at the world where such language makes sense. It would be like asking a person to read the surface grammar of "I am wearing shoes" and then accusing them of misunderstanding if they looked at our feet. Hence, using "God" as a name shows what the speaker means, but not *who* the speaker means. The fact that "God exists" and "Einstein exists" share a similar surface grammar and yet it is a mistake to look in the world for one as we would for the other tells us that there is a difference in depth grammar between them. Whatever "God" and "exists" mean, it cannot mean for God what it means for Einstein because our techniques of applying language to the world fail for one where they succeed for the other. This is why Phillips explains

> By all means, say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place. We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in this religious context, what speaking of 'reference', 'object', 'existence', and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms. (Phillips 1995, p. 138)

Our confusion is not, as a matter of surface grammar, what the speaker means when they use "God" as a name for a person that is said to exist. Our confusion is about what

that amounts to in religious life, and it is a matter of depth grammar to resolve. We know what it means in history when "Napolean" is used as a name, and we are told about a former emperor of France. We know how to look at the world when we speak about history. But we do not know what it means in religion when "God" is used as a name, and we are told about a performer of miracles. We do not know how to look at the world to make that make sense. We need to see the world as the particular language-speaking community does to see how they use language—we need to explore their form of life to gain conceptual and grammatical clarification. Although I say there is a religious point of view, I do not mean to imply that all religious people look at the world in the exact same way. Looking at the world religiously involves seeing meaning and value in things others do not, but what is associated with meaning and value, and how both are understood, varies across religions.[4] This is why we must consider how the *particular* language-speaking community sees the world. For example, Christians might see the world *as* a creation while Jains do not because Jains believe the world to be eternal (Matthews 1991, p. 184; Sharma 2001, pp. 6–8). Likewise, the question "what have I done to deserve this?" might express a religious way of looking at things for both Jewish and Hindu communities, but we know the former will not have karma in mind. Our concern is twofold: what are some religious ways of seeing the world, and how does one come to hold such a view?

Wittgenstein neither directly answers with instructions nor provides a robust theory. However, it is worth noting that the form of religion Wittgenstein envisions is quite a particular form of Christianity. It is the esoteric, existential, and romantic form of Christianity in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard. Although this paper is not an exegesis of his work, it is important to contextualise that, for the most part, our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical thought on religion is the product of our analysis of his various comments, notebook entries, lecture notes, and so forth, that are scattered throughout his work, composed and compiled decades apart. Wittgenstein likely changed his mind over the time he wrote his views on religion, but there are generally consistent themes.[5] In his 1921 *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein expresses his concept of an absolute miracle with the phrase "seeing the world *as* a miracle" which Norman Malcolm connects to the Tractatus claim "The mystical is not *how* the world is, but that it is" (Malcolm 1993, p. 10). Later, in *Lectures and Conversations*, delivered around 1938, Wittgenstein rejects evidence and scientific reason having the potential to make him religious because the religious domain is not factual, but lived (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 56). This is reiterated in *Culture and Value*, a compilation of his notes written in 1945. Here, he suggests that one could be convinced that God exists, not by evidence or argument, but by having had a certain upbringing or having experienced certain life events. He explains that by experience, he does not "mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the existence of this being" but kinds of suffering (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 85e). He has in mind a *kind* of experience that changes a person's life and forces the concept of God upon them. In Section 4, we consider his example found in *Culture and Value* of how an experience of a saint's miraculous actions could convince him to believe only if he is *impressed* by the event. But this problematically suggests that a miracle is experienced only when one looks at facts religiously and that experiencing a miracle can change a person's life and point of view towards religion. How can a person gain a religious point of view from an experience of a miracle if they must have such a point of view to experience miracles? This is answered in his *Lecture on Ethics*.

3. Lecture on Ethics

At first, it might seem odd to find Wittgenstein's contributions to our thinking about miracles run alongside his contributions to ethics. But this says something important about his views on religion and ethics: the religious and ethical are part and parcel of one another.

In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein distinguishes relative values from absolute values; the former is judged relative to facts and can be reduced to a statement of fact, while the latter is not and cannot (Bloemendaal 2006, pp. 38–39; Hughes 2009, p. 59). For example, a chair is "good" relative to its fulfilment of a function, and a worker is "good" relative to their performance. We can rephrase these relative values as statements of fact, e.g., "If you seek a chair that supports your weight, then this chair is what you seek" and "This worker arrives on time, works hard and increases our profit". Absolute values are not dependent on facts. They are also not measured by their fulfilment of a standard, nor implied by or expressible as facts. They are, in a way, self-sustaining and self-evident. This makes them trickier to imagine as it is hard to think of values that hold regardless of facts.

Wittgenstein attempts to describe the experience of absolute value by saying, "when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*", and suggests that people might have it when walking on a fine summer's day (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 8). He gives "feeling absolutely safe" as another example and suggests it is expressed by the phrase "in the hands of God" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10). We can feel the absolute value of absolute safety when in the arms of a loved one, and when we do, we can feel like we can take on the world. We might even dare the world to do its worst and throw whatever it has against us because we *know* nothing can harm us. We make this dare when experiencing absolute value, but not relative value, because relative value is, by definition, dependent on the facts. We feel safe in a house *when* the doors are locked. If those facts change, our feeling of safety changes; this sense of safety is a relative value. However, the essence of the feeling of safety one has when "in the hands of God" is precisely that the feeling remains even if the doors are open. An absolute value holds irrespective of the facts. Come Hell or high water, locked doors or open windows; I am safe in the hands of God. But there is a problem here.

Comparing an absolute value to facts or analysing it as a factual event is problematic "because they cannot be made relative to some order" of facts, values, or standards (Zamuner et al. 2014, p. 10). Another way of putting this is that it is grammatically incoherent to compare an absolute value to an alternative or express it as a fact because that makes the value relative—it is *against the rules* of speaking about absolute values to speak about them as facts. Therefore, an absolute value is not a fact but an experience of facts. Yet, that sounds a lot like a fact, both in the sense that absolute values are facts of experience and that it is a fact that we experience absolute values. This puts Wittgenstein in a bind: he wants to say it is a fact that people experience absolute value, but he cannot refer to absolute value as a fact (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10). He recognises this paradox and highlights that it is also felt in the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world". He explains that we can only wonder at something when we can imagine it being different, especially when we are wondering about something extraordinary. He exemplifies that we wonder at the size of a dog when we encounter one larger than any we have ever seen, not simply because we can imagine the dog being different but because we can compare it to an ordinary-sized dog (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 8). We wonder at the dog because its size is extraordinary, and we wonder at the extraordinary because we can imagine the ordinary. Consequently, wondering at a value implies that we can imagine it as different or not existing at all—either of which renders the value relative to or expressible as a fact. Absolute values cannot, therefore, be wondered at because they are independent of facts. So, what does it mean to wonder at the world? We can be impressed by the facts in the world, such as the colours of a bird's feather when we can imagine the feather being a more ordinary colour relative to the species. But we cannot wonder at the *existence* of the world because we cannot imagine the *existence* being different, more ordinary, or not existing at all. In that case, his description of "wondering at the existence of the world" when feeling

absolute value is not helpful because the description is nonsensical. So, what does he mean when he says this?

He answers that his description is nonsensical because all descriptions of absolute value are nonsensical. Absolute value cannot be described nor pictured because all descriptions and pictures can be judged on their factual accuracy. Speaking about it requires language to go beyond the world of facts because it is not a fact, yet we want to report facts about it. Wittgenstein expresses this challenge as "the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value"; that is, it is a fact that we experience absolute value, and yet absolute value is not a fact to be experienced (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10). Thus, on the one hand, we are immediately impressed by the profundity of an experience of absolute value, but on the other, we cannot contrast its profundity against the ordinary without miscommunicating its absoluteness (Zamuner et al. 2014, pp. 11–13). We say we "wonder at the existence of the world" when experiencing absolute value to try to express the magnitude of the absolute value. Yet we recognise we cannot *wonder* at it as that reduces it to a relative value. We see its absoluteness when we see our inability to communicate it. It is, as it were, ineffable, and we find that out when our best attempts to speak about it do not simply fail but signify the transcendence of the value in their failure. Wittgenstein thinks he can respond to this paradox through a consideration of miracles.

Wittgenstein begins by saying that when we think of miracles, the first thing that comes to mind is an extraordinary experience no one has ever had.[6] He imagines how it would be a miracle if a person's head morphed into a lion's and remarks how he would want to fetch a doctor and perform experiments to discover what had happened (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10). This would be an example of a relative miracle because its value is relative to the facts; it is factually extraordinary. But then he asks, "where would the miracle have got to?"—his point is that if we look at things scientifically—if we look at facts as just facts—we would lose sight of the other sense of a miracle.[7] From a scientific point of view, a relative miracle is an event that science has not yet explained—science cannot disprove miracles; science can only identify a phenomenon yet to be explained and endeavour to explain it (Perissinotto 2024, pp. 204–5). The scientist focuses on explaining the facts and examines the *relative* value, but this misses the point of the *absolute* and therefore is not the way to look at it *as* an absolute miracle. For Wittgenstein, the fact is not the absolute miracle no matter how extraordinary the fact appears to be, and he stresses this writing, "imagine whatever fact you may, it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of that term" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11). In an absolute sense, a miracle is experienced when a fact is looked at in a particular way, and "the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11). This is not to say that if we experience an extraordinary fact *as* an absolute miracle, there would be no natural or scientific account of the extraordinary fact.[8] Indeed, the experience of childbirth remains miraculous in an absolute sense despite how well understood it is by the scientific community.[9] In principle, we could experience an absolute miracle when observing trivial facts because the miracle is in *how* the facts are seen, and when one experiences absolute value, the facts are seen *as* miracles. Moreover, what might appear to one person as something explainable by science and not a relative miracle might appear to another as a relative miracle that only an account involving God can explain (Perissinotto 2016, p. 145). This explains that for Wittgenstein, an absolute miracle and an absolute value cannot be wondered at because they cannot be related to facts (Perissinotto 2024, p. 209). But as the phrase "wondering at" implies that one can imagine other alternative facts, Wittgenstein concludes that he "will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11). This rephrasing signifies that the experience of absolute value is miraculous in an absolute sense and cannot be imagined

otherwise (Perissinotto 2024, pp. 206–8). This grammatically clarifies "miracle": in the relative sense, we have miracles as extraordinary factual events; in the absolute sense, we have experiences of absolute value where the world is seen as a miracle. Thus, when one refers to an event as a miracle, one is either speaking in the relative sense and reporting a belief about the world or is expressing their mental states and showing us how they are experiencing the world (Scott 2010, p. 508).

This lets Wittgenstein respond to the paradox of wondering at the existence of the world—"I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11). Whatever he says when describing absolute value, including his response of wondering at the world when experiencing it, is nonsensical. It is nonsensical because an absolute value is not a fact that can be described. However, a person could experience an absolute value and miracle for the first time and remark how strange it is that they have never seen things in that way before. They might ask what caused them to see things like this. Their experience of an absolute miracle *could* be explained by their having experienced a relative miracle—that is, they have had a life-changing experience that has allowed them to see things in a new, religious way. A person must have a religious form of life and point of view to experience an absolute miracle, and a prior experience of a relative miracle is one plausible account of how such a form of life and point of view can develop in a person. This, however, places the relative miracle before the absolute, implying that the extraordinary facts of relative miracles are not what we experience as absolute miracles. However, the factual event we refer to as a relative miracle can also be what we experience as an absolute miracle. This can be seen in Wittgenstein's example of trees bowing to a saint in reverence.

4. The Miracle of a Saint

Wittgenstein summarises a miracle of a saint in *Culture and Value*, which is further explained by our account. For communication's sake, I will quote his summary in two parts and comment on each. The first part reads

> A miracle is, as it were, a *gesture* which God makes. As a man sits quietly and then makes an impressive gesture, God lets the world run on smoothly and then accompanies the words of a saint by a symbolic occurrence, a gesture of nature. It would be an instance if, when a saint has spoken, the trees around him bowed, as if in reverence.—Now, do I believe that this happens? I don't. (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 45e)

When reading the surface grammar, we picture a person called God performing extraordinary actions that prove their extraordinary powers and identity. Such an event would be a miracle in the relative sense of the word, and Wittgenstein does not believe miracles happen in *that* sense. He does not believe in the existence of an invisible person behind the scenes who pulls the strings when a morally upstanding person speaks to trees. But of course, no one who believes in the miracles of saints believes *that*. It would be remarkable if the trees bent when the saint spoke, but it would not be a miracle in an absolute sense. An absolute miracle is *how* a fact is experienced and is not itself a fact, and in this example, it would be experiencing the bending trees *as bowing in reverence*. Yet, from the context, it looks like Wittgenstein is also rejecting a belief in that. Wittgenstein does not disbelieve that people report having experiences of absolute miracles, but does he believe in this example—does he believe that anyone has experienced trees bowing in reverence to a talking saint? To see a tree bow after a saint speaks is to endorse the belief that the tree bent after the saint spoke. Wittgenstein does not believe that trees have ever bent in response to the speech of a saint; therefore, he does not believe anyone has experienced

such an event *as* an absolute miracle. Perissinotto gives a similar interpretation, "one might almost say that if Jesus had not been able to transform water into wine, there would have been no miracle, even though this act is not enough to have a miracle"—although the trees bending is not enough to be a miracle in an absolute sense, one could not experience the trees bending *as bowing* if the trees never bent (Perissinotto 2024, p. 213). Importantly, this is not general disbelief in absolute miracles—it is disbelief in specific examples. Let us contrast this to a similar example.

Wittgenstein imagines travelling to Lourdes, France, with a very credulous person and is shown a certain statue bleed:

> He says: "There you are, Wittgenstein, how can you doubt?" I'd say: "Can it only be explained one way? Can't it be this or that?" I'd try to convince him that he'd seen nothing of any consequence. [. . .] "Oughtn't one after all to consider this?" I'd say: "Come on. Come on". I would treat the phenomenon in this case just as I would treat an experiment in a laboratory which I thought badly executed. (Wittgenstein 1970, pp. 60–61)

It would be a relative miracle for the statue to bleed without a natural cause. On witnessing something that *looks* like that, Wittgenstein would sooner try and explain it than immediately concede that the statue had bled. This is the same scientific way of responding that Wittgenstein addresses in the example of a human head morphing into a lion's, and his desire to fetch a doctor and perform experiments. Wittgenstein's point is that if a person gives him empirical evidence in support of a claim, then he will respond scientifically. Even if he becomes convinced that a relative miracle has happened, his looking at the fact scientifically prevents him from experiencing it as an absolute miracle. He explains that if he utilised the scientific way of looking at the world and convinced the very credulous believer that they hadn't witnessed a relative miracle, the believer may still insist there remains a different sense of miracle. The believer might respond in the following way:

> "It is possible that these priests cheat, but nevertheless in a different sense a miraculous phenomenon takes place there". I have a statue which bleeds on such and such a day in the year. I have red ink, etc. "You are a cheat, but nevertheless the Deity uses you. Red ink in a sense, but not red ink in a sense". (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 61)

Wittgenstein suggests that the believer could admit that the statue has been hollowed out and installed with pipes through which deceiving monks pump red ink and still insist "a different sense of a miraculous phenomenon takes place". They might accept that what they had witnessed was not a relative miracle, but that does not eliminate the other sense of a miracle. What other sense could this be, besides the absolute sense, where the ink is experienced *as blood*? Bending trees *as* bowing and red ink *as* blood. In the saint example, Wittgenstein describes a miracle as a "gesture which God makes". As an experience of absolute value is an experience of the world as a miracle, does it follow that an experience of absolute value is an experience of the world as a gesture God makes? To answer, we must notice that as there are two senses to "miracle", there are two senses to "gesture".

It is easy to understand what "gesture" means in the context of a relative miracle, but it is more complex for absolute miracles. If trees bent in response to a saint, or if a statue were to bleed, we would say it was God, not the human or the statue, who performed the miracle. In seeing the trees bend and the statue bleed, we would see an *act of God*—a gesture God makes. This treats the miracles and God's existence as facts; God's matter-of-fact existence is proved through physically observable factual events that constitute relative miracles. Although an absolute miracle is experienced when facts are seen in a particular way, the notion that God, not man, performs miracles remains the same. As absolute

miracles are experiences of facts from a religious point of view, God's gesture will be a feature of the religious point of view rather than the world of facts. In this context, "gesture" means an action that symbolically expresses an attitude or way of seeing things, like how laying flowers on a grave is a symbolic gesture of respect and not an act performed on the belief that the dead enjoy seeing flowers (Malcolm 1993, p. 21). When we see a person bowing or laying flowers, we think of their way of seeing the world and the values they take themselves to respond to. A miracle is a gesture God makes and, in our example, the absolute miracle is not that the trees bend but that one sees the trees *bowing*. This lets us understand why the believer responds to Wittgenstein by affirming "the Deity uses you" despite admitting the relative miracle has been disproved.

The believer says that the Deity uses the person who puts the red ink into the statue, because when one experiences red ink *as* blood and the event *as* an absolute miracle, one experiences a gesture of God. They accept *the relative fact* that a human hand put the ink into the statue, but they experience that hand *as* the hand of God because God performs miracles. It is a human hand in a sense, but not a human hand in a sense. The human hand and the bending trees are seen as symbolically expressive gestures of God, which takes us to the second part of his summary.

4.1. Impressed by Absolute Miracles

Wittgenstein continues his summary by emphasising that he would need to be impressed by his experience to say he had experienced an absolute miracle:

> The only way for me to believe in a miracle in this sense would be to be *impressed* by an occurrence in this particular way. So that I should say e.g.,: «It was *impossible* to see these trees and not to feel that they were responding to the words. «Just as I might say» It is impossible to see the face of this dog and not to see that he is alert and full of attention to what his master is doing». And I can imagine that the mere report of the *words* and life of a saint can make someone believe the reports that the trees bowed. But I am not so impressed. (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 45e)

Wittgenstein must be *impressed* to believe in an absolute miracle, but what does he mean by "impressed"? We can make headway towards an answer by considering how he talks about the impression of a dream and the Last Judgement:

> If a man said to me after a dream that he believed in the Last Judgement, I'd try to find what sort of impression it gave him. One attitude: "It will be in about 2000 years. It will be bad for so and so and so, etc.". Or it may be one of terror. In the case where there is hope, terror, etc., would I say there is insufficient evidence if he says: "I believe. . ."? I can't treat these words as I normally treat 'I believe so and so'. It would be entirely beside the point, and also if he said his friend so and so and his grandfather had had the dream and believed, it would be entirely beside the point. (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 62)

Wittgenstein distinguishes a dream as evidence for the Last Judgement, from the impression of a dream as the origin of the person's belief in the Last Judgement. If he were to think about such a belief based on the evidence of a dream, he would judge the belief as superstitious (Ellis Forthcoming; Wittgenstein 1970, p. 59). This is because dreams are not evidence for the future—it is not *bad* evidence, but *not* evidence at all; it is, as Wittgenstein puts it, too big for a blunder (Wittgenstein 1970, pp. 61–62). However, evidence is entirely beside the point when one thinks of the dream as impressing the Last Judgement upon a person. In this way, Wittgenstein would be concerned with how the dream impacted the man's life; how it frightened or reassured him, and what else shows up in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Wittgenstein would need to be impressed in this way to become

religious and convinced that he experienced an absolute miracle—he would need the experience to *change his life*. This applies to the statue and saint examples.

If a person reported believing in God because they witnessed a statue bleed or a saint speak and trees bend towards them, Wittgenstein would respond as he would in science. He would examine the evidence that such things happened and suggest different explanations. He might ask the person to take him to the scene to look for evidence like trees bent towards a common point or a puddle of blood at the feet of a statue. This is because a relative miracle refers to events that happen in the world, so we expect evidence to be in the world. If he found evidence that convinced him that the statue bled and the trees bent, he would not consider his belief *religious* because he would be playing the game of science (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 56). The indication of having experienced an absolute miracle is not what is left in the world, but what is left in the life of the person who experienced it. He echoes the significance of seeing an absolute miracle as an impressive symbolic gesture when writing

> The transformation of water into wine is astounding at best & we would gaze in amazement at the one who could do it, but no more. [. . .] It must be the marvellous that gives this action content & meaning. And by that I don't mean the extraordinary or the unprecedented but the spirit in which it is done and for which the transformation of water into wine is only a symbol (as it were) of a gesture. A gesture which (of course) can only be made by the one who can do this extraordinary thing. The miracle must be understood as gesture, as expression if it is to speak to us. I could also say: It is a miracle only when he does it who does it in a marvellous spirit. Without this spirit it is only an extraordinarily strange fact. (Wittgenstein 2003, p. 91)

Wittgenstein is emphatic that an extraordinary fact may amaze us, but that is all it does—it does not necessarily change us or impress us such as to cause us to experience absolute value and the world as a gesture God makes.[10] We must see the event as a symbol that expresses the spirit in which it is performed, and whatever that spirit is, it is not meant to be understood as the metaphysical holy spirit. This way of thinking explains why Wittgenstein would need to be impressed such that he would say "It was *impossible* to see these trees and not to feel that they were responding to the words".

4.2. Absolute Miracles as Gestures of God's Grammatical Reality

If it were possible to see the trees and not feel that they were responding to the words of the saint, then the person experiencing the trees bowing could wonder at it. If they can wonder at it, it is relative to facts and thus not absolute. Therefore, if Wittgenstein can imagine the trees not bowing in reverence, then he has not been sufficiently impressed by the experience for it to constitute an experience of an absolute miracle. Wittgenstein is not saying it must be impossible for other people to experience things differently. His point is that the person experiencing trees bowing cannot at that moment doubt that the trees are bowing *if* their experience is of an absolute miracle. To experience an absolute miracle is to experience something that cannot be wondered at because wondering at X implies that X can be imagined otherwise. If X can be imagined otherwise, we can imagine our beliefs about X being mistaken. Put in the other direction, if my belief that X is the case could be mistaken, X may be otherwise. But X cannot be otherwise if X is an absolute miracle, so our belief of having experienced X cannot be one we could be mistaken about. Hence, it is inconceivable to experience the trees doing anything other than bowing if one's experience warrants being called an experience of an absolute miracle.

Moreover, experiencing absolute value is to see the world as an absolute miracle, and as absolute miracles are gestures God makes, an experience of one *is* an experience of God.

If Wittgenstein were to see trees *bow in reverence*, he would say he believes in God; not because his experience would prove God's metaphysical reality, but because it would be of God's grammatical reality. The term "grammatical reality" is quickly grasped when one recognises that a knight is real only in chess, and as chess is nothing more than grammar, a knight has a grammatical reality (Forster 2004, p. 8). A knight is what a knight does, and what it does is set by grammar.[11] To see a small horse figurine as a knight requires us to take up the point of view found in chess which chess players hold. One way of achieving this is by learning the grammatical rules of the game, such as "knights jump over pieces". If this is a rule of the game, then it tells us what a knight is—it cannot be false because the reality of the knight is whatever the grammar constructs it to be (Perissinotto 2016, p. 148). So too with bowing trees and God's gestures. To see a tree bend *as* bowing requires that we look at the world in a way where such actions can be seen to fulfil grammatical functions, and what one sees from a religious point of view is the reality constructed through religious grammar. Seeing trees bow in reverence is to see a miracle which is a gesture of God; therefore, to see a tree bow as a gesture of God is to see God's grammatical reality.

5. Conclusions

We set out to address two challenges of Wittgenstein's views on miracles. First, how can an experience of a miracle bring about a religious form of life if miracles can only be experienced by those who have a religious form of life? Second, why do many claim to believe because of the evidence miracles provide if religious belief is not based on evidence? We answered both by drawing a detailed picture of grammar, which we then applied to miracles. Wittgenstein distinguishes relative values from absolute values—the former are based on facts, and the latter are independent of facts. This overlapped with the two senses of a miracle—relative miracles are based on facts, and absolute miracles are independent of facts. This lets us respond to both challenges. First, a person can experience a relative miracle without a religious form of life, and such an experience can change their life and point of view to allow them to experience absolute miracles. Neither relative nor absolute miracles prove God's existence. The former refers to a cause for seeing God's grammatical reality, and the latter refers to the experience of seeing God's grammatical reality. This answers the second challenge: it is hard to mark these grammatical distinctions, and we should not be surprised that even religious communities struggle to know their way around.

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Notes

1 Wittgenstein suggests childhood upbringing in *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 85e).

2 In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein asks that we 'compare the meaning of a word with the 'function' of an official. And 'different meanings' with 'different functions". (Wittgenstein 1979, §64). If a word means what a word does then the word *is* a function, i.e., as a civil servant is *that* which serves civilians.

3 There are of course overlaps.

[4] Although it is important to ask what is commonly religious to these ways of looking, the Wittgensteinian would suspect that there will be a family resemblance account of their overlapping features. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an account of the religious identity of a way of seeing things.

[5] Not only does Wittgenstein change his mind throughout his work, but how Wittgenstein's work on religion is interpreted has also changed. For example, Pichler and Grève (2024) recently proposed that Wittgenstein held a more cognitivist view of religion in his later work than conventionally thought. Others have recently brought to focus the significance of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and the view of religious belief as a hinge commitment rather than a grammatical rule, for more on this see (Coliva 2015; Hamilton 2014; Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner 2005; Moyal-Sharrock and Pritchard 2025).

[6] One might respond, with reference to Hume, that a miracle is not simply something un-heard of, but something that violates a law of nature. However, this latter feature might not be a necessary feature for Wittgenstein. For a detailed discussion on this, see Perissinotto (2016).

[7] For a more detailed explanation of this, see Ellis (Forthcoming).

[8] Holland makes a good case for this in terms of natural accounts (Holland 1965).

[9] Scott clarifies that minimalist accounts of miracles can 'construe talk of miracles as a way of thinking about an event with particular religious significance. But this analysis pointedly allows that there will be a physical explanation of the event that does *not* rely on reference to divine action' (Scott 2013, p. 143).

[10] Durá notices this feature in Wittgenstein's passage and clarifies that Wittgenstein is talking about how Dostoyevsky understands miracles and how they are portrayed in *The Brother Karamazov*. Specifically, that 'the meaning of the Biblical account of the miracle, is connected with an «ecstasy», with an experience of the kind that Wittgenstein called «mystical»: the astonishment or amazement at the existence of the world which Alyosha celebrates at the end of the chapter. But that ineffable experience, expressible through literature, through the allegories or stories of the miracles, transforms Alyosha in a very special way: he sees the world in a different way as he celebrates its existence. It is not the facts of the world that have changed but the way of seeing it, the perspective from which it is considered and valued' (Sánchez Durá 2019, pp. 42–43).

[11] Cf., 'grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (Wittgenstein 1994, §373).

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