HINGES, THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGION AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT *

Dobradiças, a Espistemologia da Religião e o Problema do Desacordo Religioso

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Abstract: **In this paper, I propose and defend an account of the nature and the epistemology of religious beliefs loosely inspired by Wittgenstein´s remarks on the structure of reason and on the nature of religious beliefs. I argue that following and developing his account we can not only make a strong case for the *prima facie* rationality of religious beliefs but also, and more importantly, cast new light on the epistemology of religious disagreement.**

Keywords: **Wittgenstein. Hinges. Epistemic warrant. Religious disagreement.**

Resumo: **Neste artigo, proponho e defendo uma explicação da natureza e da epistemologia das crenças religiosas, inspirada nas observações de Wittgenstein sobre a estrutura da razão e a natureza das crenças religiosas. Defendo que seguindo e desenvolvendo o seu relato, podemos não só apresentar um forte argumento a favor da racionalidade *prima facie* das crenças religiosas, mas também, e mais importante, lançar nova luz sobre a epistemologia do desacordo religioso.**

Palavras-chave: **Wittgenstein. Dobradiças. Fundamento espistêmico. Desacordo religioso.**

1. Hinge epistemology and epistemic warrant

In his last notebook, published posthumously as on certainty, Wittgenstein discusses several epistemological issues such as the nature of knowledge and certainty, the structure of reason and the problem of radical skepticism.

According to Radical or Cartesian style skepticism, The defining feature of Cartesian style arguments is that we cannot know certain empirical propositions (such as 'Human beings have bodies', or 'There are material objects') as we may be dreaming, hallucinating, deceived by a demon or be "brains in the vat" (BIV), that is, disembodied brains floating in a vat, connected to super-computers that stimulate us in just the same way that normal brains are stimulated when they perceive things in a normal way.[1] Therefore, as we are unable to refute these skeptical hypotheses, we are also unable to know propositions that we would otherwise accept as being true if we could rule out these scenarios.

Cartesian arguments are extremely powerful as they rest on the *Closure principle for knowledge.* According to this principle, knowledge is "closed" under known entailment. Roughly speaking, this principle states that if an agent knows a proposition (e.g., that she has two hands), and competently deduces from this proposition a second proposition (e.g., that having hands entails that she is not a BIV), then she also knows the second proposition (that she is not a BIV). More formally:

The "Closure" Principle

If S knows that *p*, and S competently deduces from *p* that *q*, thereby coming to believe on this basis that *q*, while retaining her knowledge that *p*, then S knows that q.[2]

Let's take a skeptical hypothesis, SH, such as the BIV hypothesis mentioned above, and M, an empirical proposition like "Human beings have bodies" that would entail the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis. We can then state the structure of Cartesian skeptical arguments as follows:

(S1) I do not know not-SH

(S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M

(SC) I do not know M

Considering that we can repeat this argument for each and every one of our empirical knowledge claims, the radical skeptical consequence we can draw from this and similar arguments is that our knowledge is impossible.

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[1] See PUTMAN, H. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
[2] This is essentially the formulation of the Closure principle defended by WILLIAMSON, T. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 117.

One way of dealing with Cartesian style skepticism is to deny the premise (S1) of the skeptical argument, thus affirming *contra* the skeptic that we can know the falsity of the relevant skeptical hypothesis.

For instance, in his "*A defence of commonsense*" (henceforth DCS)[3] and "*Proof of the external world*" (henceforth PEW)[4], G. E. Moore famously argued that we can have knowledge of the 'commonsense view of the world', that is, of propositions such as, 'Human beings have bodies', 'There are external objects' or 'The earth existed long before my birth' and that this knowledge would offer a direct response against skeptical worries.

Wittgenstein wrote the 676 remarks published posthumously as *On Certainty* (henceforth OC)[5] under the influence of DCS and PEW, and in particular in the context of conversations he had about these papers with his friend and pupil Norman Malcolm.

As I have briefly mentioned *supra*, according to Moore, it is possible to provide a direct refutation of Cartesian-style skepticism, thus claiming *contra* the skeptic that we can know the denials of skeptical hypotheses.

But, Wittgenstein argues, to say that we simply 'know' Moore's 'obvious truisms' is somewhat misleading, for a number of reasons.

Firstly (OC 349, 483), because in order to say 'I know' one should be able, at least in principle, to produce evidence or to offer compelling grounds for his beliefs; but Moore cannot ground his knowledge-claims with evidence or reasons because (OC 245) *his grounds aren't stronger than what they are supposed to justify*. As Wittgenstein points out, if a piece of evidence has to count as compelling grounds for our belief in a certain proposition, then that evidence must be at least as certain the belief itself. This cannot happen in the case of a Moorean 'commonsense certainty' such as 'I have two hands' because, at least in normal circumstances, *nothing* is more certain than the fact that we have two hands[6]. As Wittgenstein writes:

> If a blind man were to ask me "Have you got two hands?" I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know

[3] MOORE, G. E. "A Defence of Common Sense". In *Contemporary British Philosophers*, 1925, reprinted in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, London, Collier Books, 1962.
[4] MOORE, G. E. "Proof of an External World". *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, reprinted in *Philosophical Papers*, London, Collier Books, 1962.
[5] WITTGENSTEIN, L. *On Certainty.* Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969.
[6] PRITCHARD, D. H. "Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing". In DODD, D. & ZARDINI, E. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Scepticism and Perceptual Justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* should be tested by *what*?[7].

Imagine, for instance, that one attempted to legitimate one's claim to know that p by using the evidence that one has for p (for example, what one sees, what one has been told about p and so on). Now, if the evidence we adduced to support p was less secure than p itself, then this same evidence would be unable to support p:

My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.[8]

Moreover, Wittgenstein argues, a knowledge-claim can be challenged by, for instance, the appeal to evidence and reasons; more generally, when we challenge a knowledge claim we can recognize what and if something has gone wrong in the agent's process of knowledge-acquisition. Things are somewhat different in the case of the denials of Moore's 'obvious truisms of the commonsense'; if, for instance, I believe that I am sitting in my room whilst I am not, there are no *grounds* on which this belief could be explained as a mistake, as an error based on negligence, fatigue or ignorance. On the contrary, a similar 'false belief' would more likely be the result of a sensorial or mental disturbance[9]. As Moyal-Sharrock[10] points out, in fact, for Wittgenstein if someone was holding seriously a denial of Moore's 'truisms' (i.e., she believed she had no body or that both her parents were men) we would not investigate the truth-value of her affirmations, but instead her ability to understand the language she is using or her sanity[11].

If Moore's 'commonsense certainties' are still not knowable, argues Wittgenstein, they are immune from rational doubt. This is so (OC 310) because doubts must be based on *grounds*; that is, they have to be internal to a particular practice and must be in some way or another *justified*. If they aren't, they are constitutively empty. To illustrate this point, Wittgenstein gives the example (OC 310) of a pupil who constantly interrupts a lesson, questioning the existence of material objects or the meaning of words; far from being a legitimate intellectual task, the pupil's doubt will lack any sense and will at most lead to a sort of epistemic paralysis, for she will just be unable to learn the skill or the subject we are trying to teach her[12].

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[7] OC 125.
[8] OC 250.
[9] OC 526.
[10] MOYAL-SHARROCK, D. *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 74.
[11] OC 155.
[12] OC 315.

Accordingly, as per Wittgenstein, all reasonable doubts presuppose *certainty* (OC 114-115); that is, the very fact that we usually raise doubts of every sort at the same time shows and implies that we take something for granted. For example, a doubt about the real existence of an historical figure presupposes that we consider certain an 'obvious truism of the commonsense' such as, 'The world existed a long time before my birth'; a doubt about the existence of a planet presupposes the absence of any doubt about the existence of the external world and so on.[13]

But if the statements listed by Moore in DCS are not knowable or doubtable, what is their status? With regard to Moore's 'truisms', Wittgenstein introduces a concept that is pivotal to understand his anti-skeptical strategy and at the same time extremely elusive: Moore's 'commonsense certainties' are, in his words, 'hinges'. Wittgenstein uses this term on different occasions, as in OC 341-343, where he writes:

> The question that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were the hinges on which those turn [….] that is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are indeed not doubted [...] If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.[14]

That is to say, 'hinges' are just apparently empirical contingent claims; on closer inspection, they perform a different, more basic role in our epistemic practices.

Wittgenstein´s remarks in OC, and especially the somewhat elusive notion of "hinges", have originated a number of different anti skeptical proposals.[15]

For my present purposes, it is worth considering some very compelling insights which can be found in a recent and influential "Wittgenstein--inspired" anti-skeptical strategy, namely Wright´s *unearned warrant*.

On Wright's account, 'hinges' such as, 'There are external objects', 'Human beings have bodies' or 'The world existed long before my birth' are beliefs whose rejection would rationally necessitate extensive reorganization, or the complete destruction, of what should be considered as empirical evidence and more generally of our epistemic practices.

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[13] OC 114-115, 514-515.
[14] OC 341-343.
[15] See for instance, among others, MCGINN, M. *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989; WILLIAMS, M. "Why Wittgenstein isn't a Foundationalist," in MOYAL-SHARROCK, D. and BRENNER, W.H. (eds.) *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. London: Palgrave, 2005, p. 47–58; PRITCHARD, D.H. *Epistemic Angst. Radical Scepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015; and COLIVA, A. *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

As per Wright, then, each and every one of our ordinary inquiries would then rest on ungrounded presuppositions, 'hinges' such as "Human beings have bodies, "The world existed long before my birth" or "There are external objects".

However, since the warrant to hold Moore's 'obvious truisms' is acquired in an epistemically responsible way, we could not dismiss them simply because they are groundless as this would lead to complete *cognitive paralysis*.[16]

Following this reading of OC, then, Cartesian skepticism can only show that everyday epistemic practices rest on ungrounded presupposition. But a system of thought, purified of all liability to Moore's 'obvious truisms of the commonsense', would not be that of a rational agent; thus, we have a default rational basis, an *entitlement*, to believe in 'hinges'[17].

With this point in mind, we can now turn our attention to the Wittgensteinian account of religious beliefs as systems of reference.

2. Religions as systems of reference

In order to understand Wittgenstein's account of the peculiar nature of religious beliefs, consider the following passage:

> What do I know about God and the purpose of life? I know that this world exists …
>
> That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
>
> That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it ….
>
> The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.
>
> […] To pray is to think about the meaning of life. (NB 72-73)[18].
>
> To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

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[16] WRIGHT, C. "Warrant for nothing (and foundation for free)?", in *Aristotelian Society Supplement*, Vol. 78, No. 1, 2004, p. 167–212 [191].

[17] According to D. H. Pritchard ("Wittgenstein's On Certainty and contemporary anti-skepticism", in MOYAL-SHARROCK, D. and BRENNER, W.H. (eds.) *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty.* London: Palgrave, 2005, 189-224), Wright's strategy can at most represent a pragmatically rational way out of skepticism, not an epistemically rational one. This is because, argues Pritchard, following Wright's proposal the only reason that we have to believe in hinges is the fact that we need them to avoid a cognitive paralysis. However, as having true beliefs about the world is not only of pragmatic but of epistemic importance, it could be argued that our acceptance of Moore's "common truisms of the commonsense" is not only pragmatically, but also and more importantly epistemically rational.

[18] WITTGENSTEIN, L. *Notebooks 1914–1916.* Ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1961, p. 72-73: 4 July 1916. [henceforth NB].

To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.[19]

A consequence of this thought is that, according to Wittgenstein, the disagreement between a Christian Theist and an atheist is way different from an epistemic disagreement about factual or empirical beliefs. As he writes at some point:

Suppose you had two people, and one of them, when he had to decide which course to take, thought of retribution, and the other did not. One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment, and another person doesn't think of this at all.

If he is ill, he may think: 'What have I done to deserve this?' This is one way of thinking of retribution. Another way is, he thinks in a general way whenever he is ashamed of himself: 'This will be punished.'

Take two people, one of whom talks of his behavior and of what happens to him in terms of retribution, the other one does not. *These people think entirely differently.*[20]

These agents do not differ about any specific factual belief; they differ on how to *interpret and make sense of reality*. Using Wittgenstein´s jargon, they are committed to radically different language games or "systems of reference". As he writes at some point:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's belief, *it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life.* It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.[21]

Differently from factual beliefs, then, religious ones do not only inform our ways of thinking but also and more importantly *our way of acting.*

Finally, according to Wittgenstein there is another striking difference between factual beliefs and religious ones. Factual beliefs about the world can be accepted, revised, or abandoned on the basis of epistemic considerations such as evidence or reasons. This is not necessarily the case when it comes to religious beliefs:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And experiences too are what bring this about; but I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the 'existence of this being', but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows

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[19] NB 74: 8 July 1916.
[20] WITTGENSTEIN, L. *Culture and Value,* ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, trans. P. Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, 54-55, [my italics]; rev. ed. Alois Pichler Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. [henceforth CV].
[21] CV 64; revised edition 73.

us an object, nor do they give rise to conjectures about him. Experiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us.[22]

Given the peculiar nature of religious beliefs, accepting, revising or abandoning them do not stem from epistemic considerations alone, but involve a number of non-epistemic standings such as mystical experiences, feelings of joy or angst, biographical experiences etc.

To sum up, there are some useful insights that we can extract from Wittgenstein´s writing on religion. A first is that religious beliefs are at odds with u religious beliefs are not only factual ones, but are part of a more general outlook by which the religious believer assesses the world; religious beliefs constitute a complex system of reference which informs not only the way of thinking but also the way of acting of the believer and finally, religious beliefs are not only epistemic in character, but involve a number of non- epistemic considerations.

So far, we have sketched some aspects of Wittgenstein´s conception of the structure of reason and some of his views on the nature and the peculiar status of religious beliefs.

A first advantage of Wittgenstein´s remarks on the matter is that they can account for the prima facie legitimacy of the religious discourse.

Recall that following Wright "unearned warrant" proposal, we are rationally entitled to accept the hinges of our epistemic language games even if they lack evidential support.

Also, not to do so will be epistemically irrational, as it will lead to an epistemic paralysis.

If it is not irrational to believe in the hinges of our epistemic practices, than it is hard to see why it should be prima facie irrational to believe in the ungrounded beliefs of a religious system of representation (such as the trinitarian conception of God, the belief in the Divine and Human Nature and the Resurrection of Christ in mainstream Christianity) even if they lack epistemic support.

It could be argued that, even accepting Wright´s overall strategy, there is a huge difference between being rationally entitled in believing Moore´s "obvious truisms" and believing in the "ungrounded presuppositions" of the various religious language games.

If we do not believe in hinges such as "There are external objects" or "Human Beings have bodies", we will be led to a cognitive paralysis, namely to the impossibility of having true beliefs about the world. This is

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[22] CV 86; revised edition 97.

clearly not the case when it comes to religious beliefs; epistemic agents can have equally true beliefs about the world even if they have very different religious beliefs, or no religious beliefs at all.

However, recall that following Wittgenstein´s account religious beliefs create a system of representations that enable the religious believer to address questions about, for instance, the ultimate meaning of the world, of human existence and of reality that crucially can be addressed only by the "religious language games". Moreover, in Monotheistic Traditions such as Christianity or Islam the belief in "ungrounded presuppositions" such as the Divine Nature of Christ or the prophetic role of Muhammad are a condition of possibility for eternal salvation.

Hence, if we are rationally entitled in believing in hinges whenever doing so will help us to engage in an epistemic practice which is relevant to us, a religious believer is even more so prima facie entitled in believing in the ungrounded presuppositions of his religion, as these are not only of epistemic but also of existential and, so to say, soteriological significance for him.

Moreover, this account can capture the specificity and the limitations of religious discourse. Recall that following Wittgenstein´s remarks, religious beliefs are not merely factual, but are meant to address concerns and questions, such as the meaning of life and of human existence, which cannot be addressed by any other language game such as our epistemic practices. Hence, it would be impossible to criticize the religious language games using the criteria of other epistemic practices such as the ones of empirical science, but it would also be improper to criticize other language games using the criteria of the religious ones.

A final and more important advantage of a view so construed is that it can account for the *multidimensionality* of religious beliefs.

As we have shown previously, throughout his writings Wittgenstein does not only insists on the nonfactual nature of the various religious systems, but also and the role played by non-epistemic factors in adopting, revising or abandoning religious beliefs.

This has led many commentators[23] to conclude that Wittgenstein´s writings on religion would license a form of fideism, according to which religious beliefs are insulated from epistemic evaluation of any sort and can be understood, let alone criticized, only by the participants of a specific "religious language game".

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[23] See for instance NIELSEN, K. "Wittgensteinian Fideism", in: *Philosophy*, 42: (1967), p. 191–209.

While there are indeed various passages in Wittgenstein´s writings that suggest this kind of reading[24], I argue that an account of the structure of religious beliefs do not necessarily leads to fideistic conclusions.

If as we have seen supra religious beliefs are not merely factual, still, they do also make factual claims about the world and more importantly *they determine ways by which the religious believer is supposed to live his life.*

That is to say, the religious language games have also moral implications, as they state how a religious believer is supposed to live his life.

As such, the various religious "systems of reference" can be evaluated using the same general criteria by which we evaluate moral proposals, namely consistency, applicability, internal support, explanatory power and external support. In the next section we will see how these desiderata are applicable to the various "religious language games" and how they can help us to address the problem of religious disagreement.

3. Moral desiderata of religions as systems of reference

So far, we have argued that religious beliefs constitute complex systems of reference by which a religious believer make sense of reality and is able to answer a number of questions that can only be properly addressed in the context of a given "religious language game".

 Moreover, following Wittgenstein´s account, we have stressed the non factual nature of religious beliefs and their non epistemic origin. However, differently from the majority of Wittgenstein inspired analysis of religious beliefs, we have argued that these considerations alone do not license a sort of religious fideism, according to which religious beliefs are insulated and "shielded" from rational inquiry.

As our epistemic practices can be evaluated by using a wide range of criterions, such as their general reliability or their capacity of producing

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[24] With regard to this point, consider the following remark: "Queer as it sounds: the historical accounts of the Gospels might, in the historical sense, be demonstrably false, & yet belief [faith] would lose nothing through this: but *not* because it has to do with 'universal truths of reason'! rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief [faith]". [CV 37f.] This remark might suggest a form of fideism (see NIELSEN, K. "Wittgensteinian Fideism") according to which religious beliefs are outside epistemic evaluation of any sort and can be held even when there is overwhelming evidence against them. However, as has been pointed out by Schroeder (SCHROEDER, S., "The Tightrope Walker", *Ratio* Vol. XX no 4, 2007, p. 100), here Wittgenstein is simply stressing the difference between the "language game" of historical research and the religious one.

true beliefs about the world, also the various religious system of reference can be evaluated by using principles that can capture their peculiar nature.

If as we have seen supra religious beliefs are not merely factual, still, they do also make factual claims about the world and more importantly *they determine ways by which the religious believer is supposed to live his life.*

An advantage of the view I am defending is that it can account for the *multidimensionality* of religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are part of a system of reference by which the religious believer make sense of reality but have also moral implications; they determine how a religious believer is *supposed to live his life.*

Hence, whether a religious "system of reference" is epistemically warranted or not can be assessed using the same general criteria by which we evaluate moral proposals, namely *consistency, applicability, intuitive appeal, explanatory power and external support.*

We will examine these *desiderata* in turn, to see if and to what extent they can be met by Christian Theistic beliefs.

Consistency. A first requirement of a religious system of reference is logical consistency. A system of thought that, for instance, invites us to believe in doctrines that contradict each other, or that considers certain acts as at the same time intrinsically evil and intrinsically commendable would not be able to fulfill this desideratum.

Applicability. As moral theories are supposed to be livable for the kind of beings we are, so are the various religious system of reference; they might have more or less strict requirements but not ones that are impossible for the kind of beings that we are. Also, they need to provide the adequate indications and information needed to fulfill these principles.

Intuitive appeal. Despite their differences, moral theories are supposed to share a few fundamental, transcultural moral insights, such as the prohibition of acts like stealing or killing. This is also valid for the religious system of reference, which can be considered more or less rational depending from their ability to fulfill this desideratum.

Explanatory power. As moral theories are supposed not only to describe which acts are permissible or not, but also to explain *why* certain acts are permissible or not, the same requirement can be used to evaluate a religious system of reference. The more a "religious language game" is able to offer theological, exegetical or philosophical grounds for its moral claims, the more can be considered epistemically warranted

External support. As epistemically rational agents, we are supposed to maximize our true beliefs about the world and minimize our false ones. In

order to do so, a rational agent is supposed to engage or at least accept the findings of several epistemic practices such as the ones of natural science.

Accordingly, a religious system of reference is warranted depending on whether or not it invites us to ignore, or is in deep disagreement with, the findings of our epistemic language games.

Concluding remarks

In this paper argued that Wittgenstein´s views on religion and the structure of reason can cast new light on both the epistemology of religious beliefs and the problem of religious disagreement.

As we have seen, according to Wittgenstein religious beliefs constitute complex systems of reference by which a religious believer can make sense of reality and is able to answer a number of questions that can only be properly addressed in the context of a given "religious language game".

Moreover, following Wittgenstein´s account, I have stressed the non-merely factual nature of religious beliefs and their non epistemic origin. From a side a similar account shows the intrinsic limitations of religious epistemology; given the complex nature of religious beliefs, which are not only epistemic in character, we are forced to admit that epistemic considerations alone cannot force an agent to accept, revise or abandon his religious beliefs.

However, an account so construed has several advantages. First of all, this strategy can make a strong case for the *prima facie* legitimacy of the religious discourse. This is because following this account religious beliefs are as ungrounded, yet as epistemically warranted, as the basic beliefs of our various epistemic practices.

Another advantage is that a similar account can prevent any illegitimate confusion between the religious language game and our epistemic practices, as the "religious system of reference" and the scientific ones have radically different concerns, methods and, so to say, "areas of competence".

Finally, starting from the multidimensionality of religious beliefs and the moral implications of the religious discourse, I have argued that the rationality of the various "religious language games" can be assessed by evaluating whether or not they fulfill a number of desiderata.

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