Logical positivism emerged in the early 1920s when Moritz Schlick, around whom it centered, became professor of philosophy at the University of Vienna. The Vienna Circle included a group of philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians who shared a concern about problems in logic, the philosophy of mathematics, and the physical and social sciences. The group attempted to elucidate these problems by establishing an empirical foundation for knowledge in the principles of logic that did not depend on metaphysics. Although metaphysical utterances may have poetic merit or express an interesting attitude toward life, they do not state anything true or false. Consequently, metaphysics cannot contribute anything to empirical knowledge. As A. J. Ayer argues, “metaphysical utterances were condemned not for being emotive . . . but for pretending to be cognitive, for masquerading as something that they were not.”1 When the metaphysician talks about the absolute, transcendent entities, substance, the destiny of man, aesthetics, ethics, or religion, he breaks the rules that an utterance must satisfy in order to be literally significant.

In religion and theology, the restriction on what counts as an assertion raised the question of whether religious language can be cognitively meaningful if it does not make significant assertions about reality. This challenge precipitated an epistemological crisis that led to one of the most intense periods of critical mental activity in modern philosophy and theology. Disagreement over how to proceed in the face of this challenge polarized philosophers and theologians into two groups. One group, called the grammarians, attempted to reconstrue the meaning of religious language

without making ontological commitments to a discourse-independent reality. Another group, called the Platonists, argued that religious language is meaningless without ontological commitments because it cannot otherwise be about anything objectively real. Religious language merely becomes an expression of emotion like poetry which can be neither true nor false. The disagreement in religion and theology about whether religious language is about something objectively real is part of a larger disagreement in philosophy about whether there is a ready-made world and whether there are determinate correspondences between this world and language. This disagreement has provoked a deep disquiet that is still with us today. I will argue that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of theology as grammar may help relieve the disquiet.

THE PLATONISTS VS. THE GRAMMARIANS

Philosophers have claimed that praying to God is like writing letters to a person with divine properties. If there is no person who answers to that definite description, then praying to God is meaningless. Peter Winch argues that philosophers often assume on the basis of this analogy that praying to God presupposes that there is a God in the philosophical sense of a metaphysical object that possesses divine properties. Whether there must be such a metaphysical object corresponding to the practice of religion is the question that divides Winch from other philosophers and theologians in their interpretation of Wittgenstein’s notion of theology as grammar. In objecting to Winch and other grammarians such as Norman Malcolm and D. Z. Phillips, Renford Bambrough argues that “theology as grammar, insofar as grammar tells us what kind of object anything is, therefore presumably tells us what kind of object God is.”

Like Bambrough, Kai Nielsen argues that the question of whether God actually secures reference, standing for something objectively real, and whether we can resolve or even dissolve this question is of prior importance. Although Nielsen agrees with the grammarians that religion can have no metaphysical foundation, he claims that such perplexities about

God and religion are not simply rooted in a second-order context where the engine is idling. Nielsen takes the fact that some people doubt the existence of God as evidence for the validity of the philosophical question of whether God actually secures reference. The grammarians do not preclude the possibility of scepticism. Just because scepticism is possible, however, does not mean that the philosophical question of whether God actually secures reference is valid. In appealing to a non-philosophical context in which such a sceptical question seems to arise naturally, Nielsen assumes that the boundary line between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts is sharper than it is or needs to be in order to support his claim. It is doubtful whether anyone can be philosophically naïve in the sense required by Nielsen’s argument. Scepticism about belief in God is influenced by philosophy more than Nielsen acknowledges. Religious scepticism does not presuppose any philosophical background, only immersion in a metaphysical tradition that is the subject of intense debate today among theists and secularists.

The disagreement between the Platonists and the grammarians is influenced by the exclusive disjunction of objectivism or relativism. Either religious language describes a metaphysical object, or language about God is meaningless and relativistic. This disjunction has acquired the status of what Hilary Putnam calls a cultural institution. Regardless of the extent to which we are familiar with its philosophical details, the disjunction of objectivism or relativism is part of our shared world picture in the modern West. This undermines the sharp distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts on which Nielsen’s argument depends. When we claim that sceptical questions arise naturally, uninfluenced by philosophy, we must remember that the language game of doubt is played after the language game of belief. Trusting what we apprehend other people as telling us as true occurs prior to doubting any part of it. Whereas trust is a natural reaction, doubt is something we must learn to do. Scepticism has become problematic because we have learned to doubt in a very sophisticated way in light of modern criticism. Thus, contrary to Nielsen, scepticism about belief in God cannot be resolved or even dissolved by clarifying the objective reference of religious language. The difficulty does not have to do with our capacity to know truth, but with the human will. If belief

6. Ibid., 104–5.
Part One: The Exclusive Disjunction of Objectivism or Relativism

in God is more difficult for us, it is because we have proved unwilling to scrutinize the doubts that have gripped us intellectually, barring the way to belief.

Unlike Nielsen, Bambrough argues that the grammarian’s notion of theology as grammar is anti-realist and therefore relativistic and heretical. For according to Bambrough, the denial of the classical realist position in theology was, until recently, set down as heresy.9 The question of whether Christianity refers to an objective reality is never raised by the grammarians. Belief in God presupposes the existence of God in a sense independent of human thought and any linguistic and epistemic practices. To speak of God, however, as revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth through the historical event of the incarnation is one matter; to speak of God as a metaphysical object outside the context of this unique historical event is quite another. The Bible claims that God is a spirit, not a metaphysical object. Although it is heretical to reject the traditional belief in the incarnation, it is not heretical to reject the philosophical characterization of God as a metaphysical object with divine properties. Thus, the notion of theology as grammar raises two issues that must be addressed. The first issue concerns the question of whether religious language can be meaningful if there is no metaphysical object with divine properties that it describes. The second issue concerns Bambrough’s charge of relativism. If we reject the classical realist or Platonist conception of the reference of religious language, the question is whether we are committed to a relativistic conception of religious language. I will address these issues in turn.

The Relation between Language and Reality

In his early philosophy, Wittgenstein argues that the possibility of comparing a proposition with reality is equivalent to the possibility of verifying it—the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification. Malcolm notes the importance of this idea in making the verification principle emerge as a central doctrine of the Vienna Circle.10 Wittgenstein’s early views about the nature of language largely coincided with those of the Vienna Circle. Like the logical positivists, Wittgenstein argues that metaphysical assertions are nonsense. In general, a statement agrees with some

truth distributions and disagrees with others. Among the possible states of affairs that a statement can describe, some would make it true and others would make it false. There are two extreme cases, however, where significant or meaningful language is degenerative. When a statement agrees with every truth distribution, it is called a tautology. Since tautologies agree with every possible state of affairs, they can be either true or false and therefore make no claim upon the facts. Suppose, for example, that we obtain information about the habits of lions. As Ayer argues, if I am told that lions are either carnivorous or not, I am told nothing about them at all. When a statement agrees with none of its truth distributions, on the other hand, it is called a contradiction. Since contradictions disagree with every possible state of affairs, they can be both true and false and therefore make no claim upon the facts. Thus, Ayer argues that if I am told that lions are and are not carnivorous, I am told nothing about them at all. Thus, tautologies and contradictions are degenerative cases of factual statements.11

On this literal view of language, significant propositions can be divided into two classes. One class consists of formal propositions such as those found in logic and pure mathematics. Wittgenstein argues that these propositions are tautologies because they do not give us any information or knowledge about the world. They add to our knowledge only in the sense that we are able to derive one statement from another, thereby making explicit the implications of what we already in a sense knew. The other class consists of factual propositions that are empirically verifiable in principle. Like the logical positivists, Wittgenstein considered these two classes exhaustive. Thus, if a statement does not express something that is formally true or false or something that can be empirically tested, it does not express any proposition at all. Consequently, since metaphysical assertions are neither formal statements nor made up of elementary propositions that bear a relation to facts, they are literally nonsensical or cognitively meaningless.

Because religious language refers in some sense to a transcendent reality, it is open to the criticism of metaphysics. One of the ways in which the metaphysical claims of religion have been attacked in the past is by questioning whether religious propositions can be deduced from premises that are self-evident to the senses. This line of attack is illustrated in the evidentialist challenge to religious belief embedded in classical foundationalism. Contrary to Kant’s conclusions about the limits of theoretical reason, many philosophers and theologians have responded to this attack

by postulating a special faculty of intellectual intuition that enables them to know facts that could not be known through sense experience. They attempt to ground such intuition or perception in the empirical premises of religious experience. As Ayer argues, “they say that it is logically possible for men to be immediately acquainted with God, as they are immediately acquainted with a sense-content, and that there is no reason why we should be prepared to believe a man when he says that he is seeing a yellow patch, and refuse to believe him when he says that he is seeing God.” If the meaning of religious propositions could be shown to rely on empirical premises, even though the venture into a non-empirical world would be unjustified, it would still not follow that the assertions that religious language makes about this non-empirical world could not be true. For, as Ayer argues, the fact that a conclusion does not follow from its premise is not sufficient to show that it is false. Consequently, one cannot overthrow metaphysics or the metaphysical assertions of religious language by criticizing the way in which they come into being.

What is required instead, Ayer argues, is a criticism of the nature of the actual statements that comprise metaphysics. Unlike Hume and Kant, who grounded the impossibility of metaphysics in the nature of what can be known, the logical positivists grounded its impossibility in the nature of what can be said. No statement that refers to a reality transcending the limits of all possible sense experience can have literal significance. Thus, the logical positivists argued that the Platonist’s notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is unintelligible. Although we may ascribe the name “God” to this person, it cannot symbolize anything unless the sentences in which the name occurs express propositions that are empirically verifiable. For, as Ayer argues, “the mere existence of the noun is enough to foster the illusion that there is a real, or at any rate a possible entity corresponding to it. It is only when we enquire what God’s attributes are that we discover that ‘God,’ in this usage, is not a genuine name.”

Ayer argues that the argument from religious experience is open to the same criticism as metaphysics. Although the mystic may claim that intuition reveals synthetic propositions, and we cannot maintain a priori that there are no ways of discovering true propositions except those that we employ, Ayer argues that those propositions must ultimately be subject to

13. Ibid., 34.
the test of actual experience. When the mystic’s discoveries are expressed as propositions, we can determine whether they are verified or confuted by empirical observation. That the mystic cannot express intuition as facts that can be tested, however, shows that the state of mystical intuition is not a genuine cognitive state. For, in describing his vision, the mystic does not give us any information about the world, but only indirect information about the conditions of his or her own mind.15 The only meaningful defense of belief in God allowed by logical positivism is some version of pantheism in which deities are identified with natural objects.

Although several issues distanced Wittgenstein from the Vienna Circle, perhaps the most important is the mystical. Whereas the logical positivists sought to emancipate philosophy from metaphysics, Wittgenstein included metaphysics in his philosophy by designating a special sphere called the mystical. The mystical includes, among other things, the most important problems of life addressed in ethics and religion, which the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard called essential truth in contrast to scientific truth. These areas of knowledge make cognitively meaningful assertions that cannot be expressed as facts and thereby reduced to the sphere of science. As Wittgenstein argues, “ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts.”16 As such, ethics and religion violate the literal sense of a proposition as defined by logical positivism. The metaphysical or transcendent nature of ethics and religion is not related literally and directly to moral and religious language in the way facts are related to empirical and scientific language. The relation between language and reality in the sphere of the mystical must be communicated indirectly. In revising the picture theory of meaning in his early thought to include ethical and religious language, Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of this language is not to be found in the object or referent that it is alleged to describe, but in the way that it is used to form a way of living that corresponds with this transcendent reality. The purpose of religious language is not to make metaphysical claims about the universe, but to shape the emotions, attitudes, and dispositions of a human being into a religious form of life. This form of life or subjectivity has a logic that can be objectively described by religious language. Thus, the existence of God is shown indirectly in the application of religious language in the life of the believer rather than described directly by it. This reconception of the relation between language

15. Ibid., 119.
and reality still involves the notion of “correspondence with reality” found in the *Tractatus*. But the nature of the correspondence is passional and indirect rather than literal and direct, and the reality is a concrete way of living rather than an abstract metaphysical object. In the case of ethics and religion, it is not language itself that corresponds with reality, but rather a way of living that is shaped by this language.

But if the primary purpose of religious language is to make statements about a discourse-independent reality, the more ordinary usage appears inferior. Like Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein argues that religious language has a limited degree of cognitive, literal, or propositional significance. As Paul L. Holmer explains, ordinary religious language has passional significance in providing a cognitively meaningful description of a constellation of passions, attitudes, and dispositions that give a religious form of life its logical shape.17 This passional significance is essential for understanding what is meant by God rather than whom is meant. Thus, when Wittgenstein argues that grammar tells us what kind of object anything is, he points out that “the great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do. As if there really were an object, from which I derive its description, but I were unable to shew it to anyone. —And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the application of the picture goes.”18 Because the referent of religious language cannot be expressed in language, it shows itself in the application of religious language in the life of the believer. Thus, Wittgenstein tells us that “the word ‘God’ is amongst the earliest learnt—pictures and catechisms, etc. But not the same consequences as with pictures of aunts. I wasn’t shown [that which the picture represented].”19

Contrary to the logical positivists and the Platonists, Wittgenstein argues that the word “God” is not a proper name or definite description. As Wittgenstein explains, “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. One said, had to say, that one believed in the existence, and if one did not believe, this was regarded as something bad. Normally, if I did not believe in the existence of something no one would think there was anything wrong in this.”20 In a non-philosophical context,
Wittgenstein argues that we would never think that Michelangelo’s picture, “God created man,” represented the Deity: “the picture has to be used in an entirely different way if we are to call the man in that strange blanket God. If I showed someone Michelangelo’s picture and said I cannot show you the real thing, only the picture, the absurdity is that I’ve never taught her the technique of using this picture. If you asked Michelangelo if he thought God creating Adam looked like this, he wouldn’t have said that God or Adam looked as they do in his picture.”

Since God is neither an object of sense experience nor an object of theoretical reason according to Kant’s theory of knowledge, we cannot compare Michelangelo's picture with its referent. Unlike the case of an ordinary object, there is no technique of comparison here. There is no determinate “correspondence with reality” as required by the literal view of language in the Tractatus. Thus, unlike the philosophical use of the word “God,” Wittgenstein argues that the ordinary use of the word does not require a correspondence theory of truth. In the words of Malcolm, what is important to see is open to everyone’s view: look at how this picture, “God created man,” is used in the religious life. As Winch explains, “the point of Michelangelo’s representation has to be seen in relation to the way in which worship and love are connected in the life of the believer. It is here that the picture is ‘confronted with reality.’ The form of representation, the sort of connection with reality, involved are totally different from that in a diagram of an accident presented with a claim on an insurance company.”

Kierkegaard, for example, tells us that the concept of sin as it is used in Christian discourse does not correspond to an objective fact in the world, but to the mood of seriousness which may or may not be part of the subjectivity of the individual.

The philosophical question of whom the picture represents disregards the more ordinary question of what the picture means in the religious life. As Wittgenstein tells us, “the way you use the word ‘God’ does not show whom you mean—but, rather, what you mean.” Thus, Winch argues that “how a term refers has to be understood in the light of its actual application with its surrounding context in the lives of its users. I italicize ‘actual’ by way of contrasting what I am talking about both with some ‘ideal’ applica-

21. Ibid., 63.
23. See Holmer, Kierkegaard and the Truth, 75.
24. Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 50.
Part One: The Exclusive Disjunction of Objectivism or Relativism

tion imagined by philosophers and also with what users of the term may be inclined to say about their application of it if asked.”25 The logic of God is different from the logic of a proper name or definite description. In the case of God, what appears to be a proper name that represents a fact turns out to have an irreducible metaphysical nature that cannot be described or expressed directly. When believers talk about God in a non-philosophical context, they do not refer to an abstract metaphysical object. If asked what they are referring to, however, believers may substitute an ideal application of the word “God” in place of its actual application. Consequently, Winch argues that when the question is posed in a philosophical context ordinary believers may respond just like the philosopher.

Winch argues that the reference of religious language is a special case of the more general problem of objective reference. Like Wittgenstein’s criticism of his early philosophy, we must scrutinize the idealized conception of language in which reference is conceived as hidden intentional relations in the mind that somehow latch onto ontological properties in the world, as when a thought or proposition reaches out to reality. Like Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, Winch urges us to think of the relation between language and reality in terms of a person’s ability to apply ordinary language in a referring way. Contrary to Bambrough, this reconception does not reduce God to a grammatical convention. Rather, the form of representation or sort of relation between language and reality proposed by a metaphysical theory of reference must be changed. Winch makes this point clear when he says that “I am not saying the ‘existence’ of what is spoken of simply consists in the fact that people talk in a certain way; I am saying that what the ‘existence’ of whatever it is amounts to is expressed (shows itself) in the way people apply the language they speak.”26

Despite the obscure nature of the alleged “correspondence with reality,” the Platonists argue that one cannot maintain the objective truth-claims of the Christian tradition without a metaphysical theory of reference. To avoid this obscurity, we must find another way to express the traditional realist claim that God exists in a sense independent of human thought without conceiving of God as a metaphysical object and thereby falling into the conundrums of objectivism. If Winch is right, classical realism depends on a literal view of language that makes the ordinary language of the Bible look imprecise because it does not conform to the paradigmatic usage of

26. Ibid.
picturing facts. When we try to describe the existence of God directly in language, we become perplexed by the relation between language and reality, by the relation of our God-talk to the existence of what is spoken about. Here, as Winch argues, “the temptation in philosophizing about religion and theology is similar to temptations in other areas of philosophy. For we seem to see a different and more direct sort of relation between language and reality by disregarding the complexities of the actual application of that language. Thus, we are led to the view that using religious language commits us to a theory about the nature of the world that language somehow enshrines.”27 What is at issue is not the commonsense realist conviction, but the philosophical theory about the relation between language and reality that attempts to express this conviction. Here, as Wittgenstein argues, we bump up against the limits of language and thought when we try to express the mystical.

THE AUTONOMY OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The Platonists argue that the adoption of a more pragmatic account of the relation between language and reality in place of the classical realist account is tantamount to anti-realism. This argument seemed plausible at the time, given the mutually exclusive dichotomy between realism and pragmatism.28 Today, in light of developments in the theory of knowledge, it is argued that one can be realist with respect to truth and pragmatist with respect to knowledge. Despite these developments, however, the charge of relativism still stands because it is supported by the exclusive disjunction of objectivism or relativism that motivated the dichotomy between realism and pragmatism in the first place. Thus, it is argued that if we adopt the more epistemically humble perspective of theology as grammar in place of the objectivist perspective in classical realism we are committed to relativism. I will argue that this sceptical conclusion does not follow.

Nielsen claims that the autonomy of language games in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language raises the problem of relativism. In particular, since the grammarians argue that religious language is distinctive, the autonomy of religious language raises the problem of relativism in religion and theology. If language games are autonomous, how can we criticize one language

27. Ibid., 203.
Part One: The Exclusive Disjunction of Objectivism or Relativism

game from the standpoint of another? In religion and theology, how can we claim that one religion is more valid or that one theology is more truth-preserving than another if we lack common criteria of meaning and intelligibility? If common criteria do not exist, the form of life enshrined in religious language appears fideistic and immune from public scrutiny. The grammarians, however, do not argue that religious language is autonomous in the sense of Cartesian internalism. Quite the opposite, they argue that the distinctiveness or intramural character of religious language depends on its external or extramural relations to other language games.29

The question, therefore, is not whether there are common criteria of meaning and intelligibility, but what sort of status they have in language. In the history of philosophy and theology, they have been given either ontological or nominal status. In both cases, Winch argues that philosophers and theologians imagine an ideal set of universal concepts whose criteria of meaning and intelligibility are independent of any language game or conceptualization. For Wittgenstein, the question of whether these criteria of meaning and intelligibility have ontological or nominal status is eclipsed by the more illuminating question of why we feel compelled to search for a neutral language that can replace the concepts of ordinary language with conceptually uncontaminated concepts. In his early philosophy, Wittgenstein argues that this compulsion is related to the experience of the mystical, to the desire to transcend the limits of language and the world in order to view the meaning of the world sub specie aeterni.30 In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein argues that although this compulsion is worthy of deep respect in the case of ethics and religion, the criteria of meaning and intelligibility established within the practice of ordinary language are valid as they stand without a metaphysical backing.

Although every language game has distinctive concepts whose criteria of meaning and intelligibility are determined by their application within that language, the concepts within one language game are related externally to concepts within other language games by family resemblances. These resemblances may disguise important differences in the actual application of concepts in various regions of language. Thus, when we place too much emphasis on family resemblances alone, we are led to an idealized conception of the universal nature of language in which these differences are disregarded. These family resemblances, however, are continually changing.

30. Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 73.
Religious Language, Reference, and Autonomy

with the development of language and the emergence of new applications of language. Although we may take a snapshot of the dynamically unfolding landscape of ordinary language, we cannot pin it down in a static description. Thus, Wittgenstein argues that we cannot appeal to a set of fixed and stable criteria of meaning and intelligibility that overarch all language games. The logic of ordinary language does not permit such a meta-linguistic perspective.

More fundamental is the assumption that we can only criticize a language game from a meta-linguistic perspective. As Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, the Enlightenment’s prejudice against prejudice has blinded us to the fact that the concepts of ordinary language provide a sufficiently objective perspective for criticism within a language game. For example, the language games of science and theology are two systems of thought and action within which there is controversy and argument. As Malcolm writes, “within each there are advances and recessions of insight into the secrets of nature or the spiritual condition of humankind and the demands of the Creator, Savior, Judge, Source. Within the framework of each system there is criticism, explanation, justification. But we should not expect that there might be some sort of rational justification of the framework itself.”

The relativist thesis that there is no sufficiently objective perspective within a language game that enables us to criticize a system of belief grips us when we disregard the actual application of language. We cannot invent an ideal set of criteria of meaning and intelligibility from scratch, apart from their application within a language game or system of belief. Such criteria emerge naturally from the application of the concepts of ordinary language. Thus, there is an intelligible notion of objective fit between our God-talk and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob within the language game of theology. For there are clear and unambiguous criteria of meaning and intelligibility established by the Christian tradition. These criteria enable us to draw a distinction between orthodox beliefs and unorthodox beliefs. The history of Christian doctrine is the story of how this dogmatic norm has evolved naturally through the application of theological concepts in the face of strong disagreement about the deposit of faith. Without these criteria, the notions of conforming to and deviating from the practice of faith are unintelligible. These criteria enable us to distinguish between “being right” and “believing one is right” within the language game of theology.

Relativism, however, rejects such a distinction. It claims that one point of view is just as valid as another point of view. But, as Hilary Putnam argues, it is contradictory to hold this particular point of view while holding that no point of view is better than another. If all points of view are equally valid, why isn’t the point of view that relativism is false just as valid as the point of view that it is true? One takes it for granted, like Bambrough and Nielsen, that the question of whether a belief is true relative to a particular language game is itself something absolute. But, as Putnam argues, a total relativist would have to claim that this question is also relative.\textsuperscript{33} Clearly, the grammarians make no such claim. Thus, relativism, given its sceptical conclusion that no point of view is better than another, is incompatible with any intelligible notion of objective fit between our God-talk and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Relativism rejects what Wittgenstein and the grammarians both accept, namely, that there is a valid distinction between “being right” and “believing one is right” within a language game.

Relativism is based on the internalist Cartesian assumption that language games are autonomous, isolated atoms of discourse. The criteria of meaning and intelligibility that govern one discourse are cut off from the criteria that govern another discourse in a dramatic sense. Wittgenstein challenges this assumption with counterexamples that show how the application of words in one language game is related to their application in other language games. When we emphasize family resemblances or what is common to language games while disregarding important differences in the application of language, we are led to a universalist or objectivist perspective that is distortive of ordinary language. Conversely, when we emphasize important differences in the application of language while disregarding family resemblances, we are led to a relativist perspective that is equally distortive of ordinary language. Thus, Wittgenstein suggests that the exclusive disjunction of objectivism or relativism arises from the failure to take into account both the similarities and differences in the actual application of language. In particular, the failure to recognize how language games are related externally has led to a dissatisfaction with ordinary language in its ability to supply sufficiently objective norms for rational inquiry.\textsuperscript{34} We no longer trust the criteria of meaning and intelligibility established within the practice of ordinary language as providing a reliable foundation for conducting further rational inquiry. The search for a neutral language that

\textsuperscript{33} Putnam, Reason, Truth, and History, 119–24.

\textsuperscript{34} Wittgenstein, Investigations, 1, §§ 65–67.
Religious Language, Reference, and Autonomy

could provide a more reliable foundation and objective perspective is the result of our unwillingness to trust ordinary language as it stands.\textsuperscript{35} Whereas scepticism doubts our capacity to know truth, relativism doubts whether we can find a sufficiently objective perspective within a language game to adjudicate strong disagreement about truth. Thus, relativism involves scepticism about rationality rather than truth.

The question of whether there are universal criteria of meaning and intelligibility that can provide a meta-linguistic perspective that overarches all language games is forced on us by the internalist Cartesian assumption of the autonomy of language games. If this assumption is correct, it follows that there is no sufficiently objective perspective within a language game according to which we can adjudicate the objective fit between our God-talk and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To avoid relativism, we feel compelled to search for a more objective perspective in order to make up our minds with confidence about questions of maximal concern. In ethics and religion, however, Wittgenstein argues that the quest for objectivity distracts us from the ethical task of becoming a self. If belief in God is more difficult today, it is not because it was easier in the past, but because we have no use for old fashioned concepts like sin, repentance, and salvation. These concepts have meaning only within the context of a way of living in which one perceives Christianity to be the remedy for consciousness of sin. Abstracted from this context, the ordinary language of the Bible is meaningless. An objectivist perspective in religion and theology assumes that we can sever the ordinary language of the Bible from the very way of living or practice that instantiates it with meaning. It assumes that we can understand the words of faith cheaply without acquiring the substantial concepts that make the words meaningful.

Objectivism assumes that we can criticize a language game, form of life, or mode of subjectivity independent of all conceptual choices. But, as Putnam argues, there just are no inputs to knowledge that are not to some extent shaped by our concepts and which admit of only one description.\textsuperscript{36} That we make conceptual choices in the way we apply religious language shifts the focus of the discussion from the reference of religious language to the ability to use this language to form a way of living that corresponds with this referent. The existence of God does not thereby drop out of the discussion as an idling piece of discourse, only the philosophical characterization

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 1, ¶ 105; 2, ¶ 200.

\textsuperscript{36} Putnam, \textit{Reason, Truth, and History}, 54.
of a person’s relation to his existence in terms of a metaphysical theory of reference. As a person’s life grows into the demanding usages of religious language, one becomes more like the reality of which it speaks. Thus, the mature Christian life is a picture of the reality of God. Through the application of religious language in the life of the believer, the human being bears the potential to manifest the existence of what is spoken about. But, as Wittgenstein argues, “what can be shown, cannot be said.”

If God’s reality cannot be expressed directly in language, but only shown indirectly by the application of religious language in the life of the believer, the question about the objective reference of God is moot. As Wittgenstein writes, “conflict is dissipated in much the same way as is the tension of a spring when you melt the mechanism (or dissolve it in nitric acid). This dissolution eliminates all tensions.” If we eliminate the philosophical mechanism of a literal relation between religious language and the existence of what is spoken about, disagreements about the objective reference of God are dissolved with the mechanism that held them in place. Instead, we may develop the emotional capacities needed to understand the ordinary language of the Bible such as despair, the consciousness of sin, and suffering. Then the Christian concepts of faith, repentance, and hope have something meaningful to say to these realities. It is here that religious language is confronted with reality, not in the philosophical sense of a religious proposition that corresponds with a metaphysical object, but in the ordinary sense of an ethical form of life that is shaped by the words of faith such that it corresponds with (shows) the invisible God of the Bible.