Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century

Edited by

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Wittgensteinian approaches to issues in the philosophy of religion have plainly been amongst the most consequential in the discipline in the postwar period. This is not, of course, because a general consensus in their favour has been established; on the contrary, if anything unites contemporary philosophers of religion, it is their deep suspicion of both the specific claims and the general methodology of those of their colleagues who have adopted a Wittgensteinian perspective. Nevertheless, it is rare to find a philosopher of religion who does not define her own position, at least in part, by specifying the nature of and the grounds for her rejection of work carried out under the Wittgensteinian banner. In this respect, that work continues to function as an essential reference point in the discipline – something that can no longer be said of many other fields of philosophical endeavour, even in the philosophy of mind or the philosophy of language (where some of Wittgenstein’s specific claims continue to attract interest, but the general methodological principles which anchor and account for them are barely mentioned, let alone specifically criticized).

Those better apprised of the radical subversion to which Wittgenstein aimed to subject the discipline of philosophy can hardly be surprised at the suspicion in which Wittgensteinian approaches to religion are held; but they are bound to be intrigued by the way in which philosophers of religion seem far less capable than their colleagues in cognate fields of simply leaving those approaches behind – of treating their own suspicions as adequate grounds for dismissing Wittgensteinian approaches rather than as endlessly renewed incentives to re-examine them. It is almost as if these approaches go with the territory – as if this perspective on the philosophy of religion resonates so intimately with some barely registered but fundamental aspect of the domain of religion itself.
that those fascinated by the latter naturally find themselves unable definitively to dismiss the former.

Is this sense of paradox intensified or dissipated if we further note that Wittgenstein's own remarks on the philosophy of religion are vanishingly slight in comparison with the sheer mass of his remarks on the philosophy of mind or of language? Should we conclude that philosophers somehow find it easier to get beyond the former than to dismiss the latter entirely, easier as it were to stumble over a few scattered pebbles than to vault over a mountain range? Or should we rather recognize that the very paucity of Wittgenstein's own remarks makes them difficult to construe and hence easy to misconstrue? Seen in this light, it may seem that what so many philosophers of religion stumble over is not so much Wittgenstein's few pebbles but the complex and ramified edifice that has been constructed from them; it may be that what they find objectionable is not Wittgenstein but what Wittgensteiniats have made of him. These opening impressions suggest a tripartite structure for the ensuing discussion. I shall begin by examining Wittgenstein's own remarks on the philosophy of religion; then I shall look at the distinctive characteristics of Wittgensteinian approaches to this area; and I shall conclude by raising some questions about what one might call a religious interpretation of Wittgenstein's general approach to philosophy—about how one might attempt to account for the spiritual fervour that so many have sensed in his writings.

Wittgenstein's interpretation of religion

In attempting to elucidate Wittgenstein's philosophical view of religion and religious belief, we must bear in mind not only that his recorded expressions of those views are very small in number but also that few of them were recorded by him and none were originally intended for publication (our sources consist of 20 pages of his students' lecture notes and a scattering of remarks in such miscellanies as Culture and Value and Recollections of Wittgenstein. In other words, even though apparently direct expressions of his views are in reality multiply filtered through the memories, editorial probitys and linguistic sensibilities of others; even here, separating Wittgenstein from the Wittgensteiniats is far from simple.

The most systematically developed of these remarks (which is not to say that they are very systematically developed) are presented in the notes made of three 1938 lectures. Broadly speaking, the first lecture emphasizes important differences between religious beliefs and beliefs about matters of fact (historical and empirical matters); the second emphasizes parallel differences between a belief in God's existence and a belief in the existence of a person or object; and the third explores the significance of a belief in life after death, or in the immortality of the soul. In all three cases, Wittgenstein engages in a grammatical investigation of these topics: he attempts to clarify the nature of religious belief by clarifying the use of expressions of religious belief—the place of religious concepts and religious uses of concepts in the lives of believers and unbelievers.

What he claims to establish thereby grows from one fundamental insight—the fact that those who hold to religious doctrines do not treat those commitments in the way they would treat an empirical claim. They do not regard them as hypotheses whose credibility varies in accordance with the strength of the evidence in their favour, they do not assign them degrees of probability, and so on. Even with what appear to be historical religious propositions (for example, concerning Christ's existence and life on earth), says Wittgenstein, believers do not treat them as they do other historical propositions. His point is not just that a believer's conviction in their truth appears utterly insensitive to the kinds of ground for doubt and caution that she would apply to other propositions about the dim and distant past. It is rather that, even if propositions about Christ's life in Palestine were established beyond all reasonable doubt in just the way that (for example) some facts about Napoleon's life have been established, this kind of certainty would not have the practical consequences in our lives that a religious belief has. As Wittgenstein puts it: 'the indubitability wouldn't be enough to make me change my whole life' (LC, p. 57).

In other words, the divergence between the role played in our lives by religious beliefs and by empirical beliefs is so systematic and pervasive that they must be acknowledged to be very different kinds of belief. We would otherwise be forced to the conclusion that religious believers generally act in a manner so ludicrously irrational as to strain credibility: as blunders go, this would just be too big—certainly too big to attribute to people who don't after all treat weather forecasts in the way they treat Gospel warnings about the Last Judgement. Neither, on the other hand, would we want to say that religious beliefs are obviously rational, as if it is obviously unreasonable to reject what faith demands. Religious believers base matters of great moment on evidence that seems exceedingly flimsy by comparison with the corroboration they require before accepting claims of far less weight for their lives, and 'anyone who reads the Epistles will find it said: not only that
It is not reasonable but that it is folly. Not only is it not reasonable, but it doesn't pretend to be' (LC, p. 58). It is rather that the evidence for religious beliefs, the doubts to which they may be subject and the certainty they may command are not species of empirical evidence, doubt and certainty, 'Religious' controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons' (LC, p. 56). From this contention, everything else Wittgenstein says in these lectures can be derived. His claim that the religious believer and the atheist cannot be said to contradict one another in the manner of disputants over an empirical claim, and his observation that a belief in the existence of God plays a role entirely unlike that of a belief in the existence of any person or object he has ever heard of (buttressed by pointing out that, for example, our ways of employing pictures of God do not include any technique of comparing the picture to that which it depicts), simply reiterates at a more concrete level his general claim about the difference between religious beliefs and empirical ones. And his discussion of the role played by a belief in life after death proceeds on the assumption that this is not an empirical hypothesis about the relation of minds to bodies, and asks how such a claim might play a role in the lives of those who make it; he suggests that this role would be clarified if, for example, the believer connects the idea to certain notions of ethical responsibility (for example, by relating the soul's immortality to the idea of its being subject to judgment). Here Wittgenstein attempts to locate one religious concept in a grammatical network of other such concepts, and to locate that network in the context of a certain way of living - thus returning us to the opening theme of his first lecture in a manner that should surprise no-one familiar with his general methodological claim that 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.'

Most of the remarks about religion scattered through the miscellanies mentioned earlier could also be seen simply as developing this same fundamental point about the divergences between religious and empirical beliefs. This is particularly evident with respect to two remarks from Culture and Value that have attracted particular attention: God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence - what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something (CV, p. 82). It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference (CV, p. 64).

As the sentences immediately following the former remark make clear, Wittgenstein is not denying that a belief in God's existence is a belief in the existence of something but rather that it is a belief in the existence of some thing: he is denying that God's existence is akin to the existence of a white elephant, of a physical object or entity - specifically in the sense that God (like the white elephant) might not have existed, that the grammar of the concept of 'God' is such as to allow us to talk of 'what it would be like if there were (or if there were not) such a thing as "God"'. As for the latter remark, it merely encapsulates Wittgenstein's claim in the lecture that religious believers orient their existence as a whole by reference to what he calls 'pictures' - specific, interrelated ways of interpreting and responding to the events and experiences that make up their lives, ways that can only be understood and explained in terms of religious concepts.

Strangely, however, much of the criticism directed at Wittgenstein's views on religion has been focused on these remarks rather than upon the more detailed and systematic lecture notes from which they derive; and that criticism has depended for its plausibility upon ignoring their roots in that material, as well as their more immediate contexts. For example, John Hyman, the author of the entry on 'Wittgensteinianism' (which is in fact an entry exclusively on Wittgenstein) in the recent Blackwell Companion to the Philosophy of Religion, finds both remarks impossible to accept.6 The former, he claims, is not supported either by the disanalogy between 'God exists' and existential propositions in science or history or geography, or by the doctrine that God cannot begin or cease to exist. If Democritus believed that atoms cannot begin or cease to exist, it does not follow that he did not believe that an atom is "eine Existenz" - an entity, or something which exists' (IWM, p. 261).

The difficulty with this argument is its extreme compression, or rather its apparent assumption that we can tell what exactly Democritus's belief about atoms amount to without far more information about their implications. In the first place, does his belief that atoms can neither begin nor cease to exist amount to a belief in their eternal existence or a belief in their endless duration (to employ a distinction of Norman Malcolm's, overlooked by Hyman despite his favourable citation of some of Malcolm's other remarks in the same essay)? A physical object or object-constituent might come into being at the beginning of the universe and remain in existence until its end; but its non-existence would remain conceivable, and hence its endless duration would be less contingent than that of a particular white elephant. God's existence, by contrast (as a Kierkegaardian remark also quoted by Hyman asserts), is eternal: his existence is not just unending but necessary. Until we know which of these conceptions of atomic
existence Democritus favours, we cannot assess its validity as a counter-
example, since an endlessly enduring atom would deserve the epithet
‘eine Existenz’ as Wittgenstein deploys it in a way that an eternal atom
would not.

Second, even if Democritus does turn out to believe that atoms have
eternal existence, whilst still being inclined to call both atoms and white
elephants ‘existent things’, this would not show that the kind of existence
possessed by empirical things and that possessed by eternal beings
was identical. On the contrary; the fact that Democritus conceives of
atoms in such a way as to exclude certain possibilities that he leaves
open with respect to elephants (and vice versa) precisely implies that
the kind of existence he attributes to the former is very different from
that which he attributes to the latter. Whether or not he (or we) would
want to call both ‘entities’ or ‘existent things’ is entirely irrelevant;
what matters is not our inclination to use the same phrase in both con-
texts when we give expression to our beliefs, but whether or not we
put it to the same kind of use.

Hyman’s objections to the second remark culled from Culture and
Value are equally unsound. ...I see no reason to accept that coming to
believe that God exists is nothing but coming to feel ‘a passionate com-
mitment to a system of reference’ – that is, coming to feel committed to
leading a life in which questions will be asked, obligations will be
acknowledged, decisions taken and actions performed, which can only
be explained or understood by the use of religious concepts. For surely,
if a convert makes that commitment, perhaps because he feels com-
pelled to, his belief that God exists will typically be part of his reason for
doing so. Nothing in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, and in particular
no part of his doctrine about the relation between language and forms of
life, implies that a form of life cannot involve historical or metaphysical
beliefs (such as that Jesus rose from the dead or that the soul is immor-
tal) as well as concepts and attitudes: all of them – beliefs, concepts and

Note to begin with that Wittgenstein does not claim that coming to
believe that God exists is nothing but a passionate commitment to a
system of reference; he claims that ‘a religious belief’ could only be
something like such a commitment. One might legitimately question
Wittgenstein’s implication that there is only one possible way of
understanding or living out a religious life; but to say that ‘x is some-
thing like y’ is plainly not equivalent to saying that ‘x is nothing but y’.
Furthermore, to equate a belief in God’s existence with religious belief
per se makes sense only on the assumption that a religious belief or
religious faith is nothing but (either reducible to or founded upon) a
belief in the existence of God – as if adopting a religious form of life is
a secondary consequence of a logically prior and logically independent
existential belief. And indeed, just such a model is presupposed by the
objection Hyman then goes on to make to Wittgenstein’s claim: he
asserts that a belief in God’s existence is typically one’s reason for com-
mitting oneself to a religious frame of reference.

But this assertion takes it for granted that we know what such a belief
amounts to or signifies – what the claim to believe that God exists
(or more plausibly, the claim to believe in God) actually means.
And on Wittgenstein’s view, we can only establish this by determining
how the concept of God functions in the practice and life of a religious
believer, which means investigating the grammatical connections
between this concept and the multitude of other religious concepts in
terms of which a believer interprets the events and experiences of her
life. But if, according to this approach, no one can so much as understand
what a belief in God’s existence amounts to without grasping the loca-
tion of that concept in the grammatical network of religious concepts
that Wittgenstein here describes as a system of reference, it makes no
sense to think that one can first establish the truth of that belief and
then use it as a reason for adopting the system of reference. On the
contrary, one could not acquire a belief in God’s existence without
both understanding and committing oneself to the broader grammatical
system in which the concept of God has its life. Consequently,
Hyman’s objection to Wittgenstein’s remark simply begs the question
against Wittgenstein’s whole approach – not only to the philosophy of
religion but to philosophy in general.

It is worth noting that Hyman is also wrong to imply that this
approach entails eliminating either the specific belief in God’s existence
or the very idea of religious belief more generally from our conception
of what goes to make up a religious way of life. On the contrary, his
claim that religious faith involves a mutually supporting relation of
beliefs, concepts and attitudes is perfectly consistent with Wittgenstein’s
position. For first, claiming that the concept of God forms part of
a system of religious concepts does not entail reducing that concept
to the other concepts to which it is related, any more than noting the
grammatical relations between psychological concepts and concepts of
behaviour entails reducing the concept of pain to that of pain-
behaviour; the concepts are internally related, not synonymous.
Neither does Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the system of religious concepts
entail denying that religious faith involves a multitude of specific beliefs;
on the contrary, that system of concepts is what makes it possible for believers to give expression to their beliefs, and it is in part through that system and the linguistic expressions it makes possible that religious attitudes make themselves manifest. Whether we want to say with Hyman that such religious beliefs are ‘historical and metaphysical’ depends on precisely what these modifying adjectives imply, and whether they are meant to constitute an exhaustive classification. Wittgenstein offers us reason to doubt whether religious historical beliefs are like other kinds of historical belief; and whilst we have no reason to expect metaphysical beliefs to be any less liable to influence the religious thinking of human beings than their moral or scientific thinking, we have as yet no reason to think that they are eliminable or dominant. This question, however, raises issues that can be more fruitfully pursued by examining the uses to which Wittgensteinians have put Wittgenstein’s own insights.

Before we go on to that section of the paper, however, I would like to conclude by pointing out that the fundamental observation from which the rest of Wittgenstein’s claims derive – the idea that religious beliefs are very different from empirical beliefs – is itself hardly original. For it amounts to no more than a reiteration of the core argument in Part I of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous text Concluding Unscientific Postscript, which comprises chapters in which Climacus examines the objective question posed by Christianity and concludes that religious beliefs cannot be a species of historical belief because ‘the greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is a mere approximation’. Of course, Wittgenstein restates this claim in his own terms, and thereby eliminates from it Climacus’s dubious assumption that there can be no such thing as certainty with respect to historical beliefs; but the core of his idea remains untouched, and other themes from the Postscript (passion, indirect communication, despair) pervade the long paragraph from which Wittgenstein’s remark about religious belief as a commitment to a system of reference is taken.

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. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. It would be as though someone were first to let me see the hopelessness of my situation and then show me the means of rescue, until, of my own accord, or not at any rate led to it by my instructor, I ran to it and grasped it (CV, p. 64).

But of course, these themes will have been familiar to theologians and philosophers of religion for a number of years – they constitute a long-recognized mode of understanding Christianity and its relation to morality and philosophy, one which is certainly not universally accepted but which is equally certainly taken to be a substantial and respectable theological option, and which long pre-dates any influence Wittgenstein’s writings and teaching have exerted. Why, then, when Wittgenstein restates these familiar themes, should we have elicited such an apparently undissimissable intensity of interest and hostility from philosophers of religion? Perhaps an examination of the work of those influenced by Wittgenstein’s remarks will help to account for this otherwise puzzling phenomenon.

Wittgensteinian interpretations of religion

Ever since the publication of Kai Nielsen’s article entitled ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism’, certain fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion have embedded themselves seemingly beyond recovery in the collective philosophical unconscious. Writers influenced by Wittgenstein – particularly D.Z. Phillips – have identified and attempted to rebut these misconceptions; so often and so forcefully that it would seem entirely otiose even to raise the question again, if it were not for the fact that these rebuttals have been so singularly unsuccessful in achieving their aim of clarifying the true implications of the Wittgensteinian approach. What I want to do, then, is look at this issue one more time – not so much with the aim of trying to settle the dispute, but in order to try to understand a little more clearly why we seemed doomed endlessly to repeat the dance of mutual misunderstanding that this dispute now seems destined to embody.

What makes the ineradicability of the term ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism’ so puzzling is that its users manage thereby to imply two radically contradictory lines of criticism simultaneously. The first is that Wittgenstein approaches illegitimately render traditional religion immune to criticism; the second is that they illegitimately criticize traditional religious attempts to justify faith. Nielsen’s original article focuses on