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WITTGENSTEIN AND RELIGION

by

DANIEL CORRIGAN

Under the Direction of Robert L. Arrington

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the implications of Wittgenstein's early and later philosophy for the issue of religious belief, as well as the relation of religion to Wittgenstein's thought. In the first chapter I provide an overview of the *Tractatus* and discuss the place of religion within the Tractarian framework. I then provide an overview of *Philosophical Investigations*. In the second chapter I consider interpretations by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch of Wittgenstein's comment that he could not help seeing every problem from a religious point of view, as well as Kai Nielsen's famous critique of 'Wittgensteinian Fideism.' The third and final chapter takes up the issue of construing religious belief as a distinctive language-game. I consider arguments from D. Z. Phillips and criticisms of Phillips from Mark Addis and Gareth Moore.

INDEX WORDS: Wittgenstein, Religion, Language-games

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2006

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Introduction

In a famous remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher once said, “I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.” It is statements such as this that have led to much debate about the relationship of religion to Wittgenstein and his philosophy. Unfortunately, the only sources we have of Wittgenstein’s comment on the matter are scattered statements in his personal writings, brief remarks reported by those who knew him, a set of student notes later titled “Lectures on Religious Belief,” and a set of remarks on an anthropological work about magico-religious ritual. Wittgenstein never wrote anything on the subject of religion that he intended for publication and never gave a comprehensive treatment of the subject in any form whatsoever.

Despite this lack of formal treatment of the topic of religion, and the scant number of sources from which to decipher Wittgenstein’s views on the subject, a “Wittgensteinian” position within the philosophy of religion has arisen nevertheless. Moreover, this position has become one of the major contenders in contemporary philosophy of religion, representing an exciting new era in the subject after a period of relative neglect arising from influences of Logical Positivism. From many sides, however, the “Wittgensteinian” position has come to be disparagingly referred to as

“Wittgensteinian Fideism,” with this label seeming to have originated in a 1967 article of the same title by Kai Nielsen.¹

This thesis will explore the relation of religion to Wittgenstein’s thought, as well as the application of Wittgenstein’s philosophy to the philosophy of religion.

Consideration will be given to a number of interpreters and critics in order to provide an understanding of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion and to examine whether the accusations of ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism’ and other criticisms have any merit.

In the first chapter, I will outline the transition from Wittgenstein’s earlier to his later thought. In the process, I will discuss the implications for religion in the earlier thought. The rest of this thesis will be concerned with interpretations and criticisms of Wittgenstein’s later thought on religion. In the second chapter, I will look first at interpretations offered by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch, and then discuss Kai Nielsen’s classic critique of these Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. The third and final chapter will consider the application of Wittgenstein’s later thought to the philosophy of religion. It will examine arguments from D. Z. Phillips, perhaps the leading Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion, as well criticisms by Mark Addis and Gareth Moore.

¹ Kai Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” *Philosophy*, 42, (1967) 191-209.

Chapter 1

I. *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein's earlier thought, as embodied in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*², had the primary goal of drawing out the philosophical implications of the new formal logic that had been developed by Gottlieb Frege and Bertrand Russell. This new logic represented a powerful tool which overcame many limitations of classical Aristotelian logic. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would not be interested in simply developing further technical aspects of this new logic, but in showing its application to the pressing issues of philosophy. “[The *Tractatus*] marks the point at which the nineteenth-century debate about the nature of logic merges with the Post-Kantian debate about representation and the nature of philosophy.”³ As both of these debates were argued in terms of the laws of thought, the point of intersection between the two issues lies in the concept of thought.

In keeping with Kant, Wittgenstein held, “Unlike science, [philosophy] does not itself represent reality, but reflects on the preconditions of representing reality.”⁴

Accordingly, the task of philosophy is to determine the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate thought. However Wittgenstein would introduce an important ‘twist’ to this Kantian project, a twist which is the origin of the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy.

Wittgenstein held that thoughts are simply propositions which are projected onto reality.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921.

³ Hans-Johann Glock, “The Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy,” in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, Ed. Hans-Johann Glock. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

“For this reason, thoughts can be completely expressed in language, and philosophy can establish the limits and preconditions of thought by establishing the limits and preconditions of the *linguistic expression of thoughts*.”⁵ Moreover, it is not just that the limits of thought *may* be drawn in terms of the limits of their linguistic expression, but that they *must* be so drawn. As Wittgenstein points out in the Preface of the *Tractatus*, to attempt to draw the limits of thought in terms of thought itself, “we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”⁶ We might say, then, that this project of delineating the limits of thought in terms of the limits of language is one which draws the limits of thought ‘from the inside.’

As for what lies beyond these limits, “[it] is not unknowable things in themselves, as in Kant, but only nonsensical combinations of signs, such as ‘The concert-tone A is red.’”⁷ What makes this proposition nonsensical is that it violates the rules of ‘logical grammar’ or ‘logical syntax.’ These rules determine whether a set of signs has been combined meaningfully, and is thus able to represent reality. This point brings us to the core of the *Tractatus*, the so-called ‘picture theory of meaning.’

According to the picture theory of meaning, language is a picture or model of states of affairs in the world. There is an isomorphic relationship between language and the world. “The essential logical form of language is identical with the essential metaphysical form of reality, because it comprises those structural features which

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 2001. 3.

⁷ Glock, 6.

language and reality must share if the former is to be capable of depicting the latter.”⁸ In other words, if our linguistic signs are to be capable of saying something about the world, then they must have the same basic structure as the reality which they are to say something about.

This basic insight is filled out as follows: Words, or as Wittgenstein calls them ‘names,’ stand for simple objects in the world. These objects give the words their meaning. It is important that these objects be simple. If they were not simple then we would need to grasp the yet simpler elements which comprise these objects. If language is to be able to say something about the world, an infinite regress must be avoided by coming to a set objects and words that are simple in an absolute sense.

Words, or ‘names,’ combine to form propositions. A meaningful proposition is one that depicts a possible ‘state of affairs.’ This term refers to a metaphysically possible combination of objects in the world. The proposition then has a truth-value (is true or false) based upon whether or not this state of affairs (combination of objects) actually obtains in the world. If a proposition does not conform to the constraints of metaphysical combinatorial possibility of objects in the world, then the proposition is nonsensical. The previously mentioned proposition, ‘The concert-tone A is red,’ is an example of this sort of nonsensical combination. While this proposition violates the rules of logical grammar, which dictate how words may be combined, it is simultaneously violating the metaphysical possibility of the ways in which objects in the world may be combined.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

Propositions such as this are incapable of having a truth-value (being true or false), as they are simply nonsense.

Wittgenstein holds that the propositions of ordinary language must be analyzed if their logical structure is to be made apparent. Propositions of ordinary language are called 'complex propositions,' and may be analyzed into the 'elementary propositions' that comprise them. Elementary propositions are in turn made of the words or 'names' just mentioned. It is important to note that a proposition does not itself name anything, but merely depicts a possible state of affairs. It has what Wittgenstein calls a 'sense,' meaning that it shows a possible way in which words (and correspondingly objects in the world) may be combined. The elementary proposition is then a 'function' of whether the state of affairs it describes exists, in other words, whether the objects it names are arranged as such. Its truth-value is a result of this 'function.' Just as an elementary proposition is a function of the existence of the state of affairs it describes, a complex proposition is a function of the truth-values of the elementary propositions which comprise it.

Each elementary proposition is logically independent of all other elementary propositions. In other words, the truth or falsity of a given elementary proposition will have no ramifications on any other elementary proposition. Each is solely a function of the existence of the state of affairs it describes. This feature of the *Tractatus* is known as the doctrine of logical atomism, an idea which Wittgenstein inherited from Russell. While Wittgenstein was unable to provide an actual example of either an elementary

proposition or simple objects which words name, he argued that these aspects of language and the world must exist if the former is to be able to say something about the latter.

The other central idea of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has to do with what he says about logic. While Frege held that logic describes relations between abstract entities and Russell that logic describes the most pervasive features of the universe, Wittgenstein would show that logical propositions do not describe anything and are actually vacuous tautologies. "The logical constants (propositional connectives and quantifiers) are not names of logical objects or functions, as Frege and Russell had it, but express the truth-functional operations through which complex propositions are constructed out of simple ones."⁹ According to Wittgenstein, logical constants are merely the means by which we combine elementary propositions, in other words, rules for the combination of signs. There are no 'logical objects' in the world to which these signs correspond. If there were, then there would be a difference in meaning between the propositions 'It is raining' and 'It is not the case that it is not raining.' But we hold that 'p' and 'not not p' are logically equivalent. Thus, logic does not name anything and tells us nothing about the world. For example, that I know it is either raining or not raining tells me nothing about the weather. "The necessity of [logical propositions] reflects the fact that they combine bipolar propositions in such a way that all information cancels out."¹⁰ The rules of logic are exclusionary; they show what cannot be the case.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

One implication of Tractarian theory is that metaphysical propositions are held to be nonsensical pseudo-propositions. According to the *Tractatus*, the task of a proposition is to picture a state of affairs, a possible combination of objects in the world. Meaningful language is thereby restricted to empirical or scientific discourse. As metaphysical propositions do not picture a state of affairs in the world, they thereby lack a sense, and hence, are nonsensical. Like the propositions of logic, metaphysical propositions are exclusionary in that they tell us what could not be otherwise. For example, they tell us a thing such as ‘red’ is a color and not a sound. “What such pseudo-propositions try to *say* is *shown* by the structure of genuine propositions (e.g. that ‘red’ can combine only with names of points in the visual field, not with names of musical tones).”¹¹ The necessity which metaphysical propositions attempt to state is instead shown by the rules we follow in combining words. “The only necessary propositions which can be expressed are tautologies and hence analytic (their negation is a contradiction).”¹²

It follows from all of this, perhaps paradoxically, that the propositions of the *Tractatus* themselves are nonsensical. Indeed Wittgenstein says at 6.54,

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as non-sensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.¹³

The obvious question that arises is, if the propositions of the *Tractatus* are themselves nonsensical, then how can they be understood, let alone be elucidatory? One answer

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Tractatus*, 89.

seems to lie in the notion that there are different types of nonsense. Nonsense does not necessarily imply gibberish, as we often conceive of it. The philosophical propositions of the *Tractatus*, like metaphysical propositions, attempt to say something that does not depict a possible state of affairs. Therefore, these philosophical propositions also lack a sense. This seems to be the sense in which these propositions are nonsensical, while they do give us a correct orientation about how to understand the world. Once we have gained this orientation, we are to set these propositions aside as the nonsense that they are.

II. Religion in the *Tractatus*

Now let us turn to a consideration of the place of religion in the *Tractatus*. It may seem initially that the *Tractatus* is a weapon to be used against religion. After all, the picture theory of language holds that the sole purpose of language is to depict possible or actual states of affairs in the world, and that any proposition failing to meet this requirement lacks sense. Just as this theory of language was used to dispense with metaphysics, so it would seem also to dispense with the propositions of theology. In fact, the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, who held the *Tractatus* as their bible, did indeed construe the picture theory of meaning as an attack on religion. The last line of the *Tractatus* reads, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”¹⁴ Otto Neurath’s reaction to this line typifies the interpretation of the Vienna Circle: “one should indeed be silent, but not *about* anything.” What Wittgenstein seems to imply in this closing line of the *Tractatus* is that anything which cannot be properly spoken about

¹⁴ *Tractatus*, 89.

according to the picture theory of language is something one should remain silent about. In other words, if language is not being used as a descriptive device to talk about the world of experience, then one should be silent about the matter so as to avoid the misuse of language. Neurath's point is to add the idea that there is nothing of substance beyond the world of experience for one to say something about in the first place.

The interpretation offered by the members of the Vienna Circle could not have been further from Wittgenstein's own intentions. When attempting to get the *Tractatus* published, Wittgenstein sent a letter to a prospective publisher, Ludwig Von Ficker. In the letter, Wittgenstein explains the *Tractatus* as follows:

I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can *ONLY* be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.¹⁵

For Wittgenstein there are things which fall outside the realm of what is sayable. It is the last few pages of the *Tractatus* which the Vienna Circle chose to overlook or to ignore. At 6.522 we find, "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical."¹⁶ As outlined above, the *Tractatus* is an attempt to demarcate what can be said from what cannot be said. Yet it is those things which cannot be said that are for Wittgenstein the most important. At 6.52 he says, "We

¹⁵ "Letters to Ludwig von Ficker," ed. Allin Janick, trans. Bruce Gillette, in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. C.G. Luckhardt. Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979: 82-98.

¹⁶ *Tractatus*, 89.

feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.”¹⁷

But what does Wittgenstein have in mind when he speaks of ‘the mystical’? At 6.4 he states, “All propositions are of the same value.”¹⁸ If the state of affairs described by a proposition exists, then that proposition has a truth-value of true. Thus, all propositions which describe an existing state of affairs are of an equal value. However, this type of value, according to the picture theory of meaning, is due to the existence of a fact (a state of affairs in the world). According to this theory then, a proposition has nothing to do with value, but only with fact. The *Tractatus* continues at 6.41,

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.¹⁹

For Wittgenstein, the world is the totality of facts (states of affairs), and these are accidental. Matters of value, and here he has in mind ethical, aesthetic, and religious matters, cannot be mere accidents. They are what he calls matters of ‘absolute value.’ If these things cannot be mere accidents, then they must have their source outside the world of facts. Thus, ‘the mystical’ is the realm of ‘absolute value,’ outside the world of fact. If the mystical lies outside the world of facts, then it also lies beyond the capability of language to say something about it because there are no objects for the words of a

¹⁷ Ibid., 88.

¹⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹ Ibid., 86.

proposition to correspond with. At 6.42 we find this point made explicit, “Propositions can state nothing that is higher.”²⁰

Turning more specifically to the religious, we find the statement, “*How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.”²¹ As with all matters pertaining to the mystical, Wittgenstein holds that God, if there is a god, is not *in* the world. God is part of that which is higher, and hence is outside the world and transcendent.

Just as Kant limited knowledge in order to make room for faith, we find Wittgenstein limiting what is sayable (and thus thinkable) in order to make room for the mystical. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein has limited the role of what science can legitimately say. Science cannot provide us with answers relating to matters of absolute value. At 6.4321 we find, “The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution.”²² Science can tell us about how things stand in the world, but this will not bring us any closer to answering the questions that are for Wittgenstein the most important, matters of absolute value. “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.”²³

Of course we find people attempting to say things that are religious and ethical all the time. Wittgenstein tells us in his notebooks from this period that he would not ridicule such people for one minute. These are matters of the utmost importance. But we

²⁰ Ibid., 86.

²¹ Ibid., 88.

²² Ibid., 88.

²³ Ibid., 88.

might ask, if our propositions have no sense when we attempt to say something about the religious, then why should we respect people's attempt to use language in this way? An answer may be found in Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics," which he gave to a group at Cambridge eight years after the publication of the *Tractatus*. In the lecture Wittgenstein says, "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who have ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless."²⁴ To say something about the mystical is an urge that has always been in human beings. Yet while we strive to say something about these matters, we can only dash ourselves against the boundaries of our language. While it may be a hopeless endeavor to attempt to say something about these matters, however, it does not follow that they are unimportant or that we should disregard them.

III. Philosophical Investigations

We have examined Wittgenstein early philosophy as found in the *Tractatus*, and also looked at the place of religion within the Tractarian framework. Let us now consider Wittgenstein's rejection of this thought and the development of his later philosophy. Upon completion of the *Tractatus* (published in 1921), Wittgenstein felt that he had solved all the problems of philosophy, and thus, left the field. It was only after being sought out by and engaging in a number of discussions with Frank Ramsey of Cambridge

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Occasions* ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

and members of the Vienna Circle, as well as hearing a lecture on the philosophy of mathematics given by Brouwer (founder of intuitionist mathematics), that Wittgenstein decided to return to Cambridge and his work on philosophy in 1929.

Ramsey was attempting to revise Russell's project of providing a logical foundation for mathematics by utilizing the theory of logic Wittgenstein had laid out in the *Tractatus*. Over the course of Wittgenstein's discussions with Ramsey, a number of problems became apparent with the system of the *Tractatus*. It was the realization of these problems that propelled Wittgenstein back into philosophy.

The initial problem, the realization of which led to the unraveling of the *Tractatus*, has been called the color-exclusion problem. The propositions 'A is red all over' and 'A is green all over' are logically incompatible. According to the *Tractatus* these two propositions would have to be analyzed into logically independent propositions. Realizing that this cannot be done, and that there are logical entailments between any propositions 'attributing a determinate property out of a determinable range,' Wittgenstein abandoned the idea that elementary propositions are logically independent. However, this idea was the linchpin of the conception of logic found in the *Tractatus*. "Without it, Wittgenstein had to acknowledge that there are logical relations which are not the result of truth-functional composition. 'A is red' and 'A is green' are logically incompatible even though their conjunction is not a contradiction that could be displayed by a truth-table"²⁵ Along with the collapse of the logical independence of elementary propositions, goes the doctrine of the essential bipolarity of elementary

²⁵ Glock, 12.

propositions, as well as the idea that there is a single propositional form requiring that all meaningful propositions are the function of truth-functional elementary propositions.

In time Wittgenstein saw that there were problems not just for the *Tractarian* theory of logic, but also for the doctrine of logical atomism and the picture theory of meaning. The ontology of logical atomism, which held that the world is a collection of facts rather than of things, could not be maintained. Facts are not concatenations of objects and cannot be located in space and time, nor are they extra-linguistic entities against which a proposition can be measured. Further, the idea that there must be absolutely simple objects to which words correspond is confused. The notions of ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ are relative. “The squares of a chessboard, for example, may be simple for the purpose of playing the game, but may be complex for the purpose of producing the board.”²⁶ If the notion of absolutely simple objects is confused, then the central idea of the picture theory of meaning holding that there exist words that are absolutely semantically simple is equally confused.

As Wittgenstein was beginning to realize these problems with the *Tractatus*, a conversation with the Marxist economist Piero Sraffa would cause him to also relinquish the notion that a proposition must be a picture of what it describes. In the course of this conversation, Wittgenstein was insisting to Sraffa that a proposition and what it describes must have the same logical form, in response to which, Sraffa made a Neapolitan gesture of contempt by brushing his fingers outward under his chin, and asking, “What is the logical form of *that*?” In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein

²⁶ Glock, 13.

remarked on Sraffa's criticisms, stating, "I am indebted to *this* stimulus for the most consequential ideas of this book."²⁷ Elsewhere Wittgenstein would elaborate on the credit he gave to Sraffa, indicating that it was Sraffa who prompted him to view philosophical problems from an anthropological perspective.

Indeed an anthropological perspective on the problems of philosophy is what we find in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the masterpiece of Wittgenstein's later thought. Where the *Tractatus* had envisioned a 'scientific world,' the *Philosophical Investigations* envisions a 'human world.' Wittgenstein actually intended to publish the *Investigations* and the *Tractatus* together at one point, as the *Investigations* is in many ways a criticism of the *Tractatus* and may be best understood in contrast with it. However, the *Investigations* represent not just a critique of the *Tractatus*, but of the whole philosophical tradition to which the *Tractatus* belongs.

Philosophical Investigations begins with a quotation from St. Augustine's

Confessions:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved toward something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding meaning. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.²⁸

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. x.

²⁸ *Philosophical Investigations*, 2.

Commentators have referred to this passage in which Augustine recounts how he learned to speak as the ‘Augustinian theory of meaning,’ and it is this theory of language that will become the focus of Wittgenstein’s attention. He goes on to say of this theory,

These words...give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.²⁹

The Augustinian theory of meaning is really just a less sophisticated version of the *Tractarian* theory of meaning. What Wittgenstein wants to show is that this picture of language, which can be found throughout the history of philosophy, distorts our view of how language actually functions.

There is a constant temptation to think that the meaning of a word is that to which it refers. However, asks Wittgenstein, what do words such as ‘Help!’, ‘Ow!’, ‘Fine!’, and ‘No!’ refer to? “Are you still inclined to call these words ‘names of objects?’”³⁰ In actuality, there are countless ways in which we use language, and referring to objects is the purpose of just one family of words within our language. Wittgenstein goes on to compare words with tools. “Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The function of words are as diverse as the function of these objects.”³¹ Sentences are conceived of in a similar manner, as ‘instruments’ that are employed in different ways.

By describing language in this manner, Wittgenstein is directing us to resist the desire to construct a general theory of language or to search for a general form of

²⁹ *Philosophical Investigations*, 2.

³⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, 11.

³¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, 6.

language. “It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of the kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)”³² The portrayal of the multiplicity of language set out in the *Investigations* is a stark contrast with the monolithic vision given in the *Tractatus*.

In place of the picture theory of meaning, the *Investigations* instruct us to find the meaning of a word by looking to its *use*. “For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”³³ A much more dynamic picture of language begins to emerge than the one found in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein points us to the vast array of ways in which language is actually used within the context of human life and social activities. To this end Wittgenstein draws an analogy between language and games. When we use words, we use them in much the same way as we use pieces to play a game such as chess. We play the game of chess by following rules governing how the pieces may be moved. Similarly, we can think of language as part of rule-governed activities which Wittgenstein refers to as ‘language-games.’ The rules of any game are arbitrary, yet within that game, they determine how it is to be played. The rules of a game are not measured against how well they represent reality (i.e. the *Tractatus*), nor are they measured in terms of the rules of another game.

³² *Philosophical Investigations*, 10.

³³ *Philosophical Investigations*, 18.

Another purpose for Wittgenstein drawing the analogy between language and games is to elucidate his contention that we must resist our desire for generality. This has already been pointed to in the idea that language has no general form. If one wanted to argue that Wittgenstein had merely failed to identify the essence of language, he developed the notion of ‘family resemblance’ to combat this criticism.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games.’ I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called “games”’—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!.....I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.³⁴

The notion of ‘family resemblance’ captures the idea that language-games do not necessarily have one thing in common, but rather have overlapping similarities. A certain pair of language-games may have overall features in common, while another pair has only details in common. The mistake of the *Tractatus* was to assume that one family of concepts—scientific concepts—reveal the general form of the totality of language.

The language-game motif is meant to elucidate the essentially *social* nature of language. “Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”³⁵ We can usually get clear about the meaning of a term by describing its use. However, we must describe the activity or form of life in which the term is used in order to properly make sense of

³⁴ *Philosophical Investigations*, 27-28.

³⁵ *Philosophical Investigations*, 10.

this usage. Language is interwoven with non-linguistic activities, and it must be understood in this context.

Finally, something must be said about the task of philosophy as conceived in Wittgenstein's later thought. Here again we find a sharp break between Wittgenstein and the philosophical tradition. Plato held that philosophy gave us knowledge of ultimate reality, while Locke held that philosophy cleared away rubbish that stands in the way of scientific knowledge, and Bertrand Russell that philosophy would 'enlarge our thoughts' and keep alive our sense of wonder at the universe. For the later Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are confusions of language, and the task of philosophy is to bring clarity to these confusions.

Wittgenstein points out that we know how to use our language very well; we do so everyday. However, when we begin to reflect upon our language, rather than simply use it, we enter into confusion. "The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing its work."³⁶ Also, "Philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*."³⁷ Here we notice the emphasis on the everyday over the reflections of philosophy. This also comes out in Wittgenstein's criticisms of the *Tractatus*, in which it was held that one had to understand the factual situation represented by a proposition and the atomic objects that comprise the situation, before one was able to perfectly understand the proposition. In fact, we perfectly well understand countless propositions everyday without understanding these things. The

³⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, 44.

³⁷ *Philosophical Investigations*, 16.

same can be said of mathematics. We *use* math perfectly well everyday without understanding the attempts to ground mathematics undertaken in the philosophy of mathematics.

As philosophical problems are merely confusions, they are not so much to be solved as *dissolved*. This task is to be achieved by reminding ourselves of the everyday usage of the concept around which the confusion has arisen.

When philosophers use a word—‘knowledge,’ ‘being,’ ‘object,’ ‘I,’ ‘proposition,’ ‘name’—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?
What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.³⁸

Wittgenstein solution to philosophical problems is the notion that we must ‘*command a clear view* of the use of our words’ by giving what he calls a ‘perspicuous representation’ of the language. A perspicuous representation will show the diversity of uses that a part of language has in an attempt to bring clarity to the confusion which has ensued.

Philosophy has no doctrines and no theses, as there is no one explanation that can free us from all confusions. Instead, each philosophical problem will require its own treatment and method of dissolution.

³⁸ *Philosophical Investigations*, 41.

Chapter 2

This chapter will begin by laying out Norman Malcolm's interpretation of Wittgenstein's later thought in relation to religion. I will then turn to Peter Winch's critique of Malcolm's interpretation, while also setting out Winch's alternative reading. Next, I will review Kai Nielsen's classic critique of these 'Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion,' as well as a more recent critique that Nielsen has offered. Finally, this chapter will conclude with my own critique of this debate.

I. Malcolm

In his essay, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*³⁹, Norman Malcolm considers what Wittgenstein may have meant by his remark, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view." In the same conversation with M. O'C. Drury in which Wittgenstein made this remark, he went on to comment, "My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age; I have to swim so strongly against the tide." Wittgenstein's remarks made Drury worry that there are dimensions of the *Philosophical Investigations* being ignored, and also to worry whether he (Drury) himself understood that the problems in this work are being seen from a 'religious point of view.' Malcolm, in writing this essay at the end of his life, has the same concerns. In fact, he questions whether his whole understanding of Wittgenstein's thought may be threatened.

³⁹ Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, ed. with a response by Peter Winch. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Malcolm begins his essay by telling us that in this remark, Wittgenstein was not referring to the problems of poverty, disease, crime, war, and the like, but to philosophical problems. “The ‘problems’ he meant are *philosophical*: those very complexities and confusions with which he grapples in the *Investigations*.”⁴⁰ To most people the suggestion that the problems discussed in the *Investigations* are being seen from a religious perspective would come as quite a surprise. There are certainly not any explicitly religious ideas present in the work.

Malcolm points us to a passage from *Philosophical Investigations*: “Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.”⁴¹ Here Wittgenstein is proposing a radical change in what philosophy ought to be doing. It is certainly not a description of how philosophy has been, or still is, practiced. “The traditional aim of philosophy has been to explain the essential nature of justice, right and wrong, duty, the good, beauty, art, language, rules, thought.”⁴² Unlike scientists, however, philosophers do not seek to give explanations in terms of the natural processes of the world. Rather, they offer explanations in terms of the meaning of words.

Usually the concentration was on *truth-conditions*. When you say that you *know* so-and-so, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be satisfied in order for your assertion to be true? If a philosopher could spell out those conditions he would be giving a *definition* of the meaning of ‘know.’ He would have given a logical analysis, or a philosophical analysis, of *knowledge*. This would be an ‘explanation’ of what knowledge is, what it consists of.⁴³

But if philosophy, as Wittgenstein has it, is not supposed to be seeking out and providing explanations, then what should it be doing? “The task of philosophy is to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁴¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, 43.

⁴² *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, 74.

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

describe. Describe *what*? Describe *concepts*. How does one describe concepts? By describing the use of the word, or those words, that express the concept. This is what philosophy should ‘put before us.’⁴⁴ It is this task of describing concepts that Wittgenstein had in mind when he spoke of describing the language-game with a word. He also referred to it as describing the ‘grammar of a word.’

Wittgenstein did not intend that philosophers should describe the use of a word in its totality. Rather, the philosopher is to describe those aspects of the use of a word that lead to philosophical perplexity. Included in this method is the comparison and contrast of the use of one word with the use of others. Through comparison with the use of related words, we may also come to a deeper understanding of a concept in question.

Malcolm emphasizes that the idea of a language-game implies that language is part of a form of life, in other words, language is “embedded in actions and reactions—in human behaviour.” Thus, describing the language-game, or the grammar of a word, involves more than a simple account of sentence-construction or syntax. The philosopher must describe how the word is used within the context of the human behavior of which it is a part.

We are asked to consider the language-game of the word ‘intention.’ When a person declares that he intends to do something, this normally results in a presumption that he will do it. Others have a right to expect that he will carry out his intentions and that they will be able to plan accordingly. “This is not a *moral* but a *logical* right. It belongs to the grammar of the words ‘I intend to do X,’ that others are entitled to expect

⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

the speaker to do X.”⁴⁵ If a person never or hardly ever carried out his announced intentions, then his words would not be taken seriously. In this case, “His ‘I intend’ might be treated the same as ‘I would like.’ An implicit promise of *doing* is part of the meaning of ‘I intend.’”⁴⁶

This brief consideration of the language-game of intention demonstrates that the word is embedded in a pattern of human activity; it has its place within a network of action and reaction, what Wittgenstein called a form of life. When a person declares his or her intentions, that person normally carries out the action. If the person does not carry out the action, then he or she will usually give an explanation or reason for why the action was not carried out. “These are explanations *within* the language-game with the word ‘intention.’”⁴⁷ What this shows is that language-games provide a place for explanations, reasons, and justifications. “For reasons for having that intention; for explanation and justification for not fulfilling it.”⁴⁸

Malcolm draws our attention to a passage from *On Certainty*, a work Wittgenstein was developing up till his death: “You must bear in mind that the language-game is, so to speak, something unforeseeable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. Not reasonable (or unreasonable). It stands there—like our life.”⁴⁹ There are two important points to be drawn from this passage. First, it represents a sharp distinction with the *Tractatus*, which held that there was an essential nature to propositions, an essence of language. This

⁴⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. 559.

passage is saying that “there is no common nature of *saying something*—that the phenomena of language have no formal unity.”⁵⁰ Here words have their meaning only within a particular language-game. The language-games have an internal connection with the forms of life, or human actions, of which they are a part. The second point to be taken from this passage involves the comparison between language-games and human life. While both are unforeseeable and inexplicable, this is not a comparison between two separate things, but of two inextricably intertwined things. Our life is expressed in language. “Certainly there could be no criticism or reflection without language. Nor anything that would come close to resembling human love, or hope, or hatred or joy. The observation and description of language-games, if it is sensitive and detailed, is actually a study of human life.”⁵¹ To study our language-games is to study our form of human life.

However, there is no explanation of the language-game itself. “There is no explanation for that particular form of life, that pattern of action and reaction with which the word ‘intention’ is internally connected. It was not invented by people because they foresaw some advantage in it, as they invent tools and machines. It was not invented at all—any more than was talking or thinking.”⁵² A language-game may be a part of our form of life, of our culture, but it need not be a part of *every* form of life that a people may share. “There could be a people who did not have any word that functions like our

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

⁵² Ibid., 76.

word ‘intention,’ nor engaged in that related pattern of activity—just as there could be a people who did not have our interest in sport, or in art.”⁵³

According to Malcolm, Wittgenstein emphasized that explanations must come to an end, and where this occurs is at the existence of language-games and their associated forms of life. “The inescapable logic of this conception is that the terms ‘explanation,’ ‘reason,’ ‘justification,’ have a use *exclusively within* the various language-games.”⁵⁴ There is an internal connection between words and the language-games of which they are a part, meaning the grammatical or linguistic rules of the language-game provide the word with its meaning. If this internal connection between word and language-game holds, then there is no meaning of the concept ‘explanation’ which transcends this context. Malcolm explains this as follows: “An explanation is *internal* to a particular language-game. There is no explanation that *rises above* our language-game, and explains *them*. This would be a *super-concept* of explanation—which means that it is an ill-conceived fantasy.”⁵⁵ There are many different concepts of ‘explanation,’ each operating within a particular language-game. A language-game itself, however, cannot be explained, but only observed and described.

On Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy, the subject matter of philosophy is philosophical confusion. These confusions arise from entanglements of our concepts. “The task of philosophy is not to explain deep mysteries, but to bring clarification and

⁵³ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 78.

therefore *light* to our thinking.”⁵⁶ Philosophy has a descriptive task, though this is in no way a theoretical one. There are no essential definitions of concepts to be discovered or theorized about, nor are we to formulate theoretical hypotheses about why we have these concepts as opposed to others. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein says of the task of the philosopher, “And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say, its purpose, from the philosophical problems.”⁵⁷

Another reason philosophy is descriptive, rather than theoretical, is because we already possess all the information that we need. There is nothing new for philosophy to discover. Philosophical confusions have their source in the concepts of our everyday language-games. “What are called philosophical ‘problems’ are actually confusions—confusions about our own concepts, the grammar of our own language, our familiar language-games.”⁵⁸ We engage in various language-games every day of our lives, and we know very well how to use the words within these language-games. A philosopher cannot teach us anything new about the grammar of our words. “A philosopher cannot teach this to us—we learned it a long time ago. What he can do is to *remind* us of something that we already know. He can remind us of fine differences between concepts—differences which we observe *in practice* in our everyday activities—but

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁷ *Philosophical Investigations*, 40.

⁵⁸ *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, 79.

which we tend to forget when we engage in intellectual reflection.”⁵⁹ The philosopher reminds us of that which we already know, but may become confused about upon reflection. Thus, on Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy, explanation is done away with and all that remains is description. As he says in the *Investigations*, “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we should see the facts as ‘primary phenomena.’ That is, where we should say: *this language game is played.*”⁶⁰

After this consideration of Wittgenstein’s later thought, Malcolm believes that we can draw four analogies between it and a religious point of view. The first analogy lies in a certain attitude toward explanation. “A possible clue may lie in the reiterated theme of [Wittgenstein’s] writings, that explanation, reasons, justifications, *come to an end.*”⁶¹ In religious thinking there is an end to explanation, holds Malcolm. For example, parents who have lost a child may be offered the words, “The Lord hath given; The Lord hath taken away. Blessed is the name of the Lord.” While these words would not provide consolation to all people who find themselves in such a situation, they may provide comfort to those with strong religious beliefs. Notice that these words bring explanation to an end and that there is no place for justification beyond them.

When the search for an explanation, a reason, a justification, is brought to an end in the acknowledgement that it was God’s will—that is a religious response. There is a religious attitude which would regard as meaningless, or ignorant, or presumptuous, any demand for *God’s* reason or justification, or any attempt to explain why He willed, or permitted, this disaster to occur.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, 141.

⁶¹ Ibid., 2.

⁶² Ibid., 2.

For a certain religious attitude, God's will is the point at which explanation terminates. There is no going beyond it and no justification for it.

Malcolm points us to the story of Job as an exemplar of this sort of attitude toward explanation. Job was a faithful and blameless man. He was also wealthy and prosperous. However, one day many tragedies befell Job: his flocks were destroyed, his children were killed when a house collapsed on them, and his body became covered in sores. Job became angry about these things which were happening to him, insisting that he was 'a just and blameless man' and that he did not deserve them. He wished to argue his case before God, declaring, "He will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to His face."⁶³ Then God spoke to Job, saying, "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?...Who can stand before me? Who has given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine."⁶⁴ Job is shaken by God's words and declares, "I know that thou canst do all things, and no purpose of thine can be thwarted....Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."⁶⁵ Malcolm tells us the point of this myth, as he interprets it, is to give us a sense of the concept of God. "It shows that the notion of there being a *reason* for His deeds has no application to God;

⁶³ *Book of Job* 10:2.

⁶⁴ *Book of Job* 10:8-11.

⁶⁵ *Book of Job* 42:2-6.

nor the notion of there being a *justification* or an *explanation* for God's actions. God stands in no need of justifying or of explaining His ways to mankind."⁶⁶

While a religious point of view may hold God's will as a point at which explanation ends, Wittgenstein's philosophy, in an analogous manner, holds that language-games and their associated forms of life are a point at which explanation ends. "The analogy to philosophy is that reasons, justifications, explanations, reach a terminus in the language-games and their internally related forms of human life. The assumption that *everything* can be explained filled Wittgenstein with a kind of fury."⁶⁷ Philosophy can only observe and describe the language-games in which we engage. It cannot give an explanation of why these practices exist.

Religion is itself one such language-game. "A religious practice is itself a language-game—a pattern in which words and gestures are interwoven in acts of worship, prayer, confession, absolution, thanksgiving."⁶⁸ As with any language-game, we cannot explain why religion exists.

Religious practices are a part of the natural history of mankind and are no more explicable than any other feature of this natural history. It is not an *explanation* to say that religious practices arise from 'a basic religious impulse'—any more than it is to say that bodies fall to the earth because of the force of gravity. The existence of religious practices can no more be explained than can the existence of sports, or of musical composition.⁶⁹

While reference to the will of God may put an end to explanation from a religious point of view, this reference is not meant to function *as* an explanation. "If it were meant as an explanation, then the *same* explanation would explain everything....An explanation

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein: *A Religious Point of View?*, 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 84-85.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 85.

that explains everything in the same way, actually explains nothing.”⁷⁰ When we give attention to how this reference to the will of God functions within a religious perspective, we see that it is a way of bringing comfort. It is “...an attempt to bring to an end the torment of asking ‘*Why* did it have to happen?’—an attempt to give the tormented one rest, to provide *peace*.”⁷¹

The second analogy between a religious point of view and Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy lies in a notion that Wittgenstein spoke about in his ‘Lecture on Ethics,’ given in 1929. “Wittgenstein said that sometimes he ‘wondered at the existence of the world,’ and that he thought that this was the experience of ‘seeing the world as a miracle.’”⁷² This ‘seeing the world as a miracle’ is something that religious people commonly speak about. It is a wonder that there is anything rather than nothing. We find a similar attitude toward language-games in some of Wittgenstein’s later writings, an expression of a kind of wonder at their existence. While language-games come into and go out of existence in the course of human history, there is no predicting how this will occur. “New language-games are not based on grounds or reasons, and therefore cannot be foreseen.”⁷³

The wonder at the existence of our language-games is not exactly the same as the religious sense of wonder at the existence of things. “This philosophical astonishment is not a religious sense of the miraculous—for it does not view the language-games as

⁷⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁷¹ Ibid., 86.

⁷² Ibid., 86.

⁷³ Ibid., 87.

sacred.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, we do find a similarity in the sense of wonder and astonishment. “But in respect to the feeling of wonder and mystery, it is analogous to the religious sense of the miracle of the world and the miracle of human life.”⁷⁵

The third analogy involves the notion that there is something basically wrong with human beings. A religious point of view holds that humans have an inherently sinful nature.

We pursue the idols of wealth and status; we want to be admired; even our love is contaminated by jealousy, resentment, hatred; we are quickly offended and slow to forgive; scarcely ever do we love others as we love ourselves; we do little in the way of giving drink to those who thirst and food to those who hunger; we are beset by anxieties; we fear death.⁷⁶

A genuinely religious perspective holds that we are spiritually ill even when we feel healthy. Wittgenstein once spoke of this religious perspective, commenting, “People are religious in the degree that they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect*, as *ill*. . . . Any half-way decent man will think himself extremely imperfect, but a religious man believes himself *wretched*.”

When characterizing philosophy as it has traditionally been practiced, Wittgenstein would similarly use terms such as ‘illness’ and ‘disease of thinking.’ The search for explanations where there are none, the confusions of language in which we become entangled, these are the symptoms of the illness of philosophical confusion. “The analogy only means that in both cases something is wrong with us—on the one

⁷⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

hand, in the way we live and feel and regard others; on the other hand, in the way we *think* when we encounter a philosophical question.”⁷⁷

The fourth and final analogy between a religious point of view and Wittgenstein’s later philosophy involves the notion of the priority of action over thinking or reflection. For Wittgenstein there is no value in intellectual proofs of God’s existence. “For him the crucial aspect of serious religious feeling is the emphasis on ‘changing one’s life,’ ‘amending one’s ways,’ ‘helping others’ . . . Wittgenstein would have agreed with St. James that ‘Faith, without works, is dead.’”⁷⁸ This view of religious belief is made very explicit in a journal entry Wittgenstein made in 1946.

One of the things Christianity says, I think, is that all sound doctrines are of no avail. One must change one’s *life*. (Or the *direction* of one’s life).
That all wisdom is cold; and that one can no more use it to bring one’s life into order than one can forge *cold* iron.
A sound doctrine does not have to *catch hold* of one; one can follow it like a doctor’s prescription.—But here something must grasp one and turn one around.—(This is how I understand it.) Once turned around, one must *stay* turned around.
Wisdom is passionless. In contrast faith is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*.

In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein makes the comparison between language and games, while emphasizing that in playing games the players must *act*. This is designed to point out the fact that our linguistic concepts are rooted in action and activity rather than in reasoning and interpreting. “Throughout his philosophical work Wittgenstein is attempting to locate the basis of our concepts in pre-linguistic, pre-rational actions and reactions. It is not from intuitions, nor convictions, nor any kind of reasoning, that our

⁷⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 90.

language-games emerge—but from ‘our acting.’”⁷⁹ Thus, the fourth analogy lies in the relation between the notion that our concepts ultimately rest upon a basis of human action and the notion that what is most fundamental in a religious life is *doing* good deeds as opposed to intellectually assenting to some creed or embracing some theological theory.

II. Winch

Peter Winch has provided a critique of Malcolm’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, as well as offered an alternative reading. In this section I will set out this critique and alternative reading.

Winch believes Malcolm to be largely correct about Wittgenstein’s attitude toward explanation, but is concerned about the emphasis which Malcolm gives to it. “I have no doubt that Malcolm is right in discerning such a pervasive attitude to explanation in Wittgenstein’s writing. All the same, I find myself profoundly uneasy at the *kind* of emphasis he gives to it.”⁸⁰ The primary thing lacking is an account of the kind of puzzles that have led traditional philosophers to seek the sorts of explanations that they do. This search for explanation has been driven by a certain view of what logic requires of a significant utterance.

It has seemed to them that the logical consequences that can be drawn from such an utterance must be precisely determined by the *meaning* which it bears at the time at which it is made; and that, furthermore, that meaning, i.e. all the necessary and sufficient conditions of the use of the utterance, must be intended, *meant*, by the utterer at the time of the utterance, since otherwise the utterer will be at full liberty to accept or refuse a given consequence at random and no one will ever know with certainty what anyone (including him or herself) is actually saying.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid. 92.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁸¹ Ibid., 103.

If these conditions are not met, it is felt, then no one would be genuinely saying anything.

It is important for two reasons to give proper attention to the role of puzzles that drive the philosophical search for explanation. The first is that it shows the *type* of explanation that Wittgenstein wished to warn philosophers against. We should not seek those explanations “which provide users of the language with a justification for using words in the way they do.”⁸² The second reason is that Wittgenstein goes far beyond a warning against these types of explanation in his writing, with the majority of his attention directed to the difficulties giving rise to the search for these explanations.

Wittgenstein never thought that convincing the philosopher that explanations come to an end would be enough to stop the obsessional insistence on asking unanswerable questions. The real work that had to be done was to make clear the misunderstanding from which that insistence arose. Arriving at clarity concerning the limits of explanation would be, at most, a stage on the way.⁸³

The problem with Malcolm’s emphasis is that it would lead us to believe Wittgenstein was guided by the question, ‘*Where* do explanations end?’ This perspective may lead to Spinoza’s notion of a *causa sui*. On this view, explanations must come to an end because there must be something that has no further explanation. Wittgenstein’s purpose, however, was to criticize this type of outlook.

He does not think that explanations come to an end with something that is intrinsically beyond further explanation. They come to an end for a variety of quite contingent and pragmatic reasons, perhaps because of a practical need for action, perhaps because the puzzlement which originally prompted the search for explanation has evaporated (for one reason or another).⁸⁴

The practical matters of human life are what bring explanation to an end.

⁸² Ibid., 103.

⁸³ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 104.

It is also misleading for Malcolm to claim that Wittgenstein believed language-games and their associated forms of life to be beyond explanation. “Language-games are not phenomena that Wittgenstein had discovered with the peculiar property that their existence cannot be explained!”⁸⁵ Again, Wittgenstein was primarily concerned to expose the confusion involved in the search for certain types of explanation and the puzzles that give rise to it. “The concept of a language-game has to be understood as a logical instrument in the service of that exposure.”⁸⁶ The notion of a language-game is meant to serve as a tool for Wittgenstein’s diagnosis of traditional philosophy. In fact, he thought that hypothetical language-games we invent may be as useful for this purpose as consideration of our actual existing language-games. “His appeal is to be understood not as: ‘Look, here is something that cannot be explained,’ but rather, ‘Look at things from this point of view; then you will see the difficulties that you are trying to deal with are not going to be dealt with through any sort of explanation of the sort you are seeking.’”⁸⁷

Wittgenstein did not believe that language-games and our social practices are beyond all attempts at scientific explanation. The sciences often provide well-founded explanations for the sorts of questions those disciplines are concerned with. The issue is what bearing these *type* of explanations have for the sorts of problems philosophers are concerned with.

As far as the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences (as distinct from philosophy) are concerned, Wittgenstein’s point was not, I believe, that language-games are intrinsically beyond the power of these sciences

⁸⁵ Ibid., 104-105.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 105.

to provide explanations, but rather that any explanation they might offer would turn out to be quite uninteresting and useless *as far as the philosopher's characteristic puzzlement is concerned*.⁸⁸

The scientists' explanations say nothing about the sort of pseudo-explanations that philosophers seek. The rationalism of Spinoza's *causa sui*, for example, was what Wittgenstein wanted to expose as senseless. Scientific explanations do nothing to elucidate this kind of puzzlement.

After making these points about Malcolm's general interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, Winch turns to Malcolm's interpretation of Wittgenstein's remark that he could not help seeing all problems from a religious point of view. Winch questions Malcolm's assertion that Wittgenstein meant *philosophical* problems when he said this. First, there are non-philosophical problems in Wittgenstein's writings and reported conversations that seem to be seen from a religious or quasi-religious point of view. "For instance, the problem of how to live with something in one's life of which one is ashamed; the problem of how to conduct oneself in the face of death; generally, the problem of how to live a decent life."⁸⁹ After all, in his remark, Wittgenstein did say that he could not help seeing *every* problem from this point of view. Further, while Wittgenstein may have seen some philosophical problems from a religious point of view, it seems that frequently they are not seen from this perspective. "Although, of course, they *can* be looked at from this point of view, they do not have to be and perhaps more frequently than not they are not generally seen in this way."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 105-106.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 96.

Secondly, Winch disagrees with the exclusive terms in which Malcolm offers the alternatives. For Malcolm, either Wittgenstein was referring to the social-political problems that Malcolm mentions (unemployment, crime, poverty, etc.), or he was referring to philosophical problems. Winch counters, “We may perhaps allow that [Wittgenstein] was singling out his attitude to philosophical problems for special attention, but there is no reason to think that he was not also expressing an attitude to many other sorts of problems as well.”⁹¹

This is an important point because Malcolm’s interpretation rests on the assumption that in his remark, Wittgenstein was referring to an analogy between religious and *philosophical* problems. If we acknowledge that Wittgenstein may have also been referring to problems other than philosophical ones, then Malcolm’s search for an analogy becomes implausible. “Are we to say for instance that [Wittgenstein] saw an analogy between religious problems and the problems of decency in the manner of one’s life? If we do so, we are in danger of losing our grip on any manageable question.”⁹² There would be no end to the search for all the analogies that hold between a religious point of view and all the different sorts of problems Wittgenstein considered in the course of his life. However, when we look to the specific wording of Wittgenstein’s remark, we find no mention of analogy.

Winch thinks it a mistake to search for analogies in this context, and gives consideration to the four analogies Malcolm claims to have found between a religious

⁹¹ Ibid., 97.

⁹² Ibid., 97.

point of view and Wittgenstein's later thought. The first analogy involved a certain attitude toward explanation. Winch claims that to properly evaluate Malcolm's first analogy we need to distinguish between two issues: first, religious belief is itself a language-game for which it makes no sense to ask for an explanation; second, for a religious believer, it is said that a reference to God's will is an end to explanation. On the first issue, it is misleading to speak of an *analogy* to philosophy, as the claim that the expression of religious belief is a language-game is just itself a philosophical point. If it is a general philosophical point that language-games are beyond explanation, and also that religious belief is itself a language-game, then of course religious belief is beyond explanation in the same manner as all other language-games. The second issue, that for a religious believer God's will is an end to explanation, is also to make a philosophical point. In this case it is a philosophical point *about* a particular feature of a certain religious language-game.

Given that both issues in Malcolm's 'analogy' amount to philosophical points, where does this leave the notion of an analogy?

If one is to speak of any 'analogy' between philosophy and religion at this point, then, I suppose a case must be made for saying that the readiness to come to rest at a certain point and say, as it were, explanation stops here, plays a role within religion (regarding references to God's will) analogous to the role such a readiness plays in philosophy, as practiced by Wittgenstein (regarding references to language-games).⁹³

However, this seems to be a problematic claim. Wittgenstein constantly warns us against too hasty a comparison of things that have a similar surface appearance. "*Practice* gives the words their sense," he emphasizes. If we look at the role this attitude toward

⁹³ Ibid., 112.

explanation plays in each context, we will find something very different. “The practice associated with giving up the demand for explanation in philosophy bears little comparison with the giving up the demand for explanation in religion, despite the similar words with which we may, in part at least, describe them.”⁹⁴ The idea of surface similarities concealing deep differences is a point on which Winch will rely throughout his critique of Malcolm’s analogies.

Malcolm’s second analogy involved a sense of wonder common to both religion and philosophy. Winch argues that these two types of wonder are so different that it would be weak at best to speak of an analogy between them. Again Wittgenstein, and even Malcolm himself, were keen to argue against confusion based on similarity of surface appearances. This is another case in which we must look beneath the surface.

When we give close attention to the religious sense of wonder at the existence of the world and Wittgenstein’s sense of wonder at the existence of our language-games, we find that they are very different. Winch points to a passage in which Wittgenstein spoke about miracles:

A miracle is, as it were, a *gesture* which God makes. As a man sits quietly and then makes an impressive gesture, God lets the world run on smoothly and then accompanies the words of a saint

⁹⁴ Ibid., 113.

by a symbolic occurrence, a gesture of nature. It would be an instance if, when a saint spoke, the trees around him bowed, as if in reverence.—Now, do I believe that this happens? I don't. The only way for me to believe in a miracle in this sense would be to be *impressed* by an occurrence in this particular way. So that I should say e.g.: 'It was *impossible* to see these trees, and not to feel that they were responding to the words.'....And I can imagine that the mere report of the *words* and life of the saint can make someone believe the reports that the trees bowed. But I am not so impressed.⁹⁵

We notice in this passage that the miraculous involves either seeing something in such a way or not seeing it in that way. 'Seeing it' in this context is almost indistinguishable from *reacting* to it in a certain way. When one sees something as miraculous, that person finds it 'impossible' not to see it in that way. In other words, one finds himself unable to see it in another way. Wittgenstein, however, says he is 'not so impressed.' Here we find evidence that any sense of wonder Wittgenstein felt toward the existence of our language-games was not one that involved seeing them as the work of God. There is an infinite distance, claims Winch, between the religious sense of wonder and Wittgenstein attitude toward language-games.

The third analogy involves a religious notion of our being 'ill' and Wittgenstein's diagnosis of philosophical problems as a symptom of a 'disease of thinking.' Winch levels the same sort of critique against this analogy, namely, that each notion of 'illness' is dependent on an extremely different context, making any talk of analogy very weak.

The fourth and final analogy involves the idea that the crucial element in religion is the active 'changing of one's life' and the philosophical point that our everyday linguistic concepts require a base of acting or doing. Malcolm tells us that Wittgenstein would have rejected any conception of religion that construes it as basically a 'doctrine,'

⁹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*. 45.

or that understands religion as relying on intellectual ‘proofs of God’s existence.’

Religion, for Wittgenstein, is not a matter of reasoning. Malcolm holds that Wittgenstein would have agreed with St. James’ claim that ‘faith, without works, is dead.’

However, contends Winch, the relation between faith and works, as it is understood by St. James, is not simply a particular instance of the relation between thinking and acting. Faith has its expression in practice, which St. James means to distinguish from mere works, such as church attendance, religious observance, etc. “What matters in *this* context is the qualitative nature of the ‘acting’: namely, for instance, that it should be directed at the welfare of one’s fellow human beings rather than *merely* at the observance of religious forms.”⁹⁶ We may find a person who performs good works for all sorts of reasons (upbringing, social pressure, etc.) which have nothing to do with faith. Alternatively, we may find someone who performs good works done in the context of religious faith, and yet this person attaches great importance to its connection with intellectual proofs. Much more needs to be said about what characterizes good works done in the context of faith from good works not done in such a context. Malcolm seems to talk as though we are dealing with works that can be understood independently of their connection with the particular faith held by the religious believer. Ultimately, Malcolm fails to make clear the internal connection that is involved.

After his dismissal and critique of the notion of analogies, Winch offers an alternative way in which Wittgenstein’s remark that he ‘can not help seeing every

⁹⁶ Ibid., 120-121.

problem from a religious point of view' might be understood. Looking back to Wittgenstein's surviving letters and reported conversations, we find that when he speaks in explicitly religious terms, he usually seems to disclaim authority to give religious advice. He speaks as one who is an outsider to religious faith. But though speaking as an outsider to faith, there is a religious or quasi-religious attitude present. Among other things, we find a deep concern for his friends' spiritual welfare, the conception of the time one has in this life as a gift, and the idea that life imposes certain duties on us. In a conversation with his friend Drury, Wittgenstein once said, "Mind you I don't believe what Kierkegaard believed, but of this I am certain, that we are not here in order to have a good time."⁹⁷

When Wittgenstein speaks about religion, we find that he attempts to sum up the sense of religion in a philosophical manner. We also find that his 'own voice' comes out when speaking of religion, something not often found in his philosophical writings, such as *Philosophical Investigations*. For instance, Wittgenstein wrote the following remark in 1944:

No cry of torment can be greater than the cry of one man.
 Or again, *no* torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer.
 A man is capable of infinite torment therefore, and so too he can stand in need of infinite help.
 The Christian religion is only for the man who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the man who experiences infinite torment.
 The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul.
 The Christian faith—as I see it—is a man's refuge in this *ultimate* torment.
 Anyone in such a torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ M. O'C. Drury, "Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. 88.

⁹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. Von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1980. 46.

Besides this sense of his ‘own voice,’ however, we also feel a great passion which he brings to his discussion of religion. He brought a similarly intense passion, virtually unmatched in the history of philosophy, to his treatment of philosophical problems. It is in this common passionate attitude toward religious and philosophical issues that Winch believes we can find the basis of Wittgenstein’s remark that he could not help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.

But this attitude involves more than a mere passion. It is constituted by a passion and a need for *clarity*. For Wittgenstein, clarity about these issues can mean everything to a person who is concerned about religious or philosophical problems. “We retain the sense that for someone to whom such philosophical issues matter a lack of clarity about them can have grave implications for his or her own relation to life.”⁹⁹ This intense need to achieve clarity is perhaps illustrated by a passage from the preface of *Philosophical Remarks*, a manuscript that is an early proto-type of *Philosophical Investigations*.

I would like to say, ‘this book is written to the glory of God,’ but nowadays this would be the trick of a cheat, i.e. it would not be correctly understood. It means the book was written in good will, and so far as it was not but was written from vanity etc., the author would wish to see it condemned. He can not make it more free of these impurities than he is himself.

In the last sentence of this passage we notice the assertion that the character of the writer and the character of the work are internally connected. Just as a religious person must strive to live a pure life and see things in the right way, so must the person concerned with philosophical issues strive to achieve the proper character and clarity about these issues.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 130.

Wittgenstein's conception of his life and of the problems with which it confronted him can certainly be called religious in the elusive but important sense spoken of earlier. His philosophical work was for him, moreover, one of the most important expressions of his life. It is to be expected therefore that there should be a religious dimension to this work.¹⁰⁰

It is in seeing this connection, rather than in some comparison between religious and philosophical questions, that Wittgenstein's remark may be best understood.

III. Nielsen

This third section will examine Kai Nielsen's classic critique of Malcolm, Winch, and other 'Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion,' as found in his article "Wittgensteinian Fideism."¹⁰¹ Additionally, I look at a more recent critique Nielsen has added to his earlier criticisms.

Nielsen, in his classic article, coined the term 'Wittgensteinian Fideism,' a label which has come to be regularly attached to philosophers of religion who write under the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Nielsen points out at the beginning of his article that there is no one source to which someone can turn for the definitive statement of what he calls Wittgensteinian Fideism. Rather, this position must be pieced together from the writings of Malcolm, Winch, Stanley Cavell, G. E. Hughes, and others.

Nielsen lists eight propositions that together tend to generate Wittgensteinian Fideism:

1. The forms of language are the forms of life.
2. What is *given* are the forms of life.
3. Ordinary language is all right as it is.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 132.

¹⁰¹ Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Philosophy*, July 1967, 191-209.

4. A philosopher's task is not to evaluate or criticize language or the forms of life, but to describe them where necessary and to the extent necessary to break philosophical perplexity concerning their operation.
5. The different modes of discourse which are distinctive forms of life all have a logic of their own.
6. Forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism; each mode of discourse is in order as it is, for each has its own criteria and each sets its own norms of intelligibility, reality and rationality.
7. These general, dispute-engineering concepts, i.e. intelligibility, reality and rationality, are systematically ambiguous; their exact meaning can only be determined in the context of a determinate way of life.
8. There is no Archimedean point in terms of which a philosopher (or for that matter anyone else) can relevantly criticize whole modes of discourse or, what comes to the same thing, ways of life, for each mode of discourse has its own specific criteria of rationality/irrationality, intelligibility/unintelligibility, and reality/unreality.¹⁰²

The Wittgensteinian Fideist can combine these points to argue that religion is a unique and ancient form of life with its own distinctive criteria. This has the effect of limiting who may properly claim to understand religion and also the manner of criticism that can be leveled against religion. "It can only be understood and criticized, and only then in a piecemeal way, from within this mode by someone who has a participant's understanding of this mode of discourse."¹⁰³ The Wittgensteinian Fideist contends that to argue that religious discourse is incoherent and irrational, as Nielsen does, is to enter into confusion. "Philosophy cannot relevantly criticize religion; it can only display for us the workings, the style of functioning, of religious discourse."¹⁰⁴

Nielsen agrees with the Wittgensteinian Fideist that one must have a participant's understanding in order to understand religious discourse.

¹⁰² Ibid., 192-193.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 193.

Anthropologists for years have stressed, and rightly, that one cannot gain a deep understanding of the distinctive features of a tribe's culture without a participant's understanding of the way of life of that culture. Concepts cannot be adequately understood apart from a grasp of their function in the stream of life. If a man has no experience of religion, has never learned God-talk where the 'engine isn't idling,' he will not have a deep understanding of religion.¹⁰⁵

However, Nielsen is quick to point out, this does not entail that one actually be a participant, or accept or believe, in the religion in question. Nielsen does not agree with the Wittgensteinian Fideist that religious discourse is in order as it stands, or that philosophy is unable to relevantly criticize religion or forms of life.

Nielsen turns first to his claim that first-order religious discourse is incoherent and irrational, and therefore, not in order as it stands. By 'first-order religious discourse,' he means that discourse which is used by everyday religious believers, as distinguished from religious discourse which may be used by philosophers or theologians. The Wittgensteinian Fideist will argue that any discourse will appear conceptually confused if it is insisted that it must conform to the logic of some other category of discourse in order to make sense. We find this is true if we treat inductive arguments as though they were deductive, as well as if we treat moral propositions as though they were empirical propositions. "We have learned to treat these concepts and modes of reasoning as being *sui generis*; inductive reasoning and moral reasoning have, in the sense Ryle uses 'logic,' a logic of their own."¹⁰⁶ The Wittgensteinian Fideist holds that the philosopher must display this logic and avoid distorting or confusing it with some other logic. "Our job as philosophers is to come to understand and display that logic, not to distort it by trying to reduce it to the logic of some other preferred type of discourse or to try to interpret it in

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 192.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 194.

terms of some ideal language like that found in *Principia Mathematica*.”¹⁰⁷ In support of this notion that religious discourse has a logic of its own, the Wittgensteinian Fideist may argue that religious language is a “long-established *fait accompli*, and something which does a job which no other segment of language can do.”¹⁰⁸

Against the idea that religion is a *fait accompli*, Nielsen reminds us that in all times and societies there have been ‘skeptics and scoffers,’ those people, who though possessing a participant’s understanding of the religion of their culture, refused to play the religious language-game because they found it incoherent. “There are people who can play the language-game, even people who *want* very much to go on playing the language-game of religion, but they morally and intellectually speaking cannot continue this activity because their intellects, not their natural sympathies, make assent to Jewish or Christian doctrine impossible.”¹⁰⁹ In contrast, Nielsen points out that there is not this kind of dissent when it comes to mathematics and ‘material object’ language. “But our first-order operations with what some *philosophers* call ‘material object talk’ and our actual operation with arithmetic are not in this state of controversy. (Meta-mathematics may be in a shambles, but not arithmetic or algebra).”¹¹⁰ Nielsen acknowledges that this is not a decisive argument against religious discourse being in order as it stands, but he does feel it to be a powerful point against the coherence of this order.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 196. See for example, G. E. Hughes, “Martin’s *Religious Belief*,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40, August 1962. 211-219.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 196.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 196.

In our current culture, Nielsen points out, more and more people are coming to find religious discourse incoherent. It is not enough to point out to these people that this language-game is played. These people know all too well how to play this language-game, yet their perplexity is over the very discourse this language-game involves. It is not that they are puzzled about what philosophers of religion or theologians are saying, but by first-order religious discourse itself.

A Wittgensteinian Fideist might reply that it is that part of religious language that is ‘really alive in religion’ and essential to religion which is in order. However, this response would lead to undesirable consequences: “But if this reply is made we are likely to end up (1) with a very un-Wittgensteinian essentialist bogeyman, and (2) with treating religion or True Religion as little more than ‘morality touched with emotion,’ i.e. Santayana’s ‘moral poetry.’”¹¹¹ The second consequence of this reply is particularly troublesome for the following reasons: first, the Christian Creed is crucial to Christianity as it is understood by the orthodox, and second, it is a concession that first-order religious discourse is not in order as it stands.

In many of his writings, Peter Winch has explored what it is to understand concepts radically different from our own. Some of his considerations are central to understanding Wittgensteinian Fideism. In his article, “Understanding a Primitive Society,”¹¹² Winch examines the methodology of Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Azande conception of magic. Evans-Pritchard holds that in order to understand Azande concepts,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹¹² Peter Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 1, October 1964. 307-325.

we must understand them in the way they are taken by the Azande themselves, within their own social structure, or in other words, in terms of their form of life. Nevertheless, argues Evans-Pritchard, the Azande are obviously operating under an illusion. “There is no magic and there are no witches. We know that we, with our scientific culture, are right about these matters and that the Azande are wrong. Our scientific account of these matters is in accord with objective reality while the Azande magical beliefs are not.”¹¹³

Winch argues against this view that while there is an independent ‘reality’ to which ideas and beliefs must remain ‘checkable,’ Evans-Pritchard is wrong to construe science as that which accords with this reality. “Evans-Pritchard is mistaken in thinking that, while the Azande have a different conception of reality from ours, our scientific conception agrees with what reality is like while theirs does not.”¹¹⁴ For Winch, science does not have the peculiar ability to check on the independently real over and above other modes of discourse. “It is a mistake to think, as Evans-Pritchard and Pareto do, that scientific discourse provides us with a ‘paradigm against which to measure the intellectual respectability of other modes of discourse.’”¹¹⁵

According to Nielsen, Winch makes the real step into Wittgensteinian Fideism when, after providing these general critiques of Evans-Pritchard, he follows with the claim that what God amounts to ‘can only be seen from the religious tradition in which the concept of God is used.’ A religious context is very different from a scientific

¹¹³ Nielsen, 198.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹¹⁵ *Ibis.*, 198-199.

context, and only within a religious use of language does the conception of God's reality have its place.

As the concept of what is real or what is unreal *vis-à-vis* magic is only given within and only intelligible within the Azande form of life in which the Azande magical practices are embedded, so the concept of God's reality is only given within and only intelligible within the religious form of life in which such a conception of God is embedded. In both cases there is an ongoing form of life that guarantees intelligibility and reality to the concepts in question.¹¹⁶

For Winch the concepts of 'reality' and 'unreality' only have their place within a form of life. There is no extra-linguistic or context-independent conception of these concepts by which to judge forms of life.

Nielsen points to a central passage from Winch's article, one which underwrites the claims made thus far: "Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language."¹¹⁷ The claim is that language does not derive its sense from 'reality,' but to the contrary, the sense of the real and unreal are given by a language itself. Winch goes on to argue that these distinctions, though not the words used to make them, must be a part of any language. Without these distinctions, there would be no communication, and hence no language. However, the way this distinction is drawn is a matter of the linguistic usage of a particular language.

In keeping with this, it is held that one who claims that God-talk is unintelligible or incoherent, is first of all making a claim that does not make any sense. This person is using a conception of reality that is not determined by the actual religious usage of

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 199.

¹¹⁷ Winch, 309.

‘reality’. Secondly, this person is mistakenly assuming that their specialized use of ‘reality’ can be used as a yardstick to appraise any and every form of life. Yet no reason has been provided for adopting this procedure or making this assumption.

If we understand scientific discourse, then we can determine within that discourse whether a given hypothesis agrees with reality. The problem arises when Evans-Pritchard makes the following claim: “Criteria applied in scientific experimentation constitute a true link between our idea and an independent reality.” This is neither a scientific hypothesis nor an empirical statement. Confirmation or disconfirmation of this assertion is not possible. Moreover, “...if ‘true link’ and ‘independent reality’ are explained by reference to the scientific universe of discourse, we would beg the question of whether scientific experimentation, rather than magic or religion, constitutes a true link between our ideas and an independent reality.”¹¹⁸ As Evans-Pritchard does not give these expressions a use or show that they have a use, he employs them in a meaningless and indeterminate way.

Winch’s argument is reinforced by a claim made in his *The Idea of a Social Science*.¹¹⁹ In this work, Winch argues:

Logic, as a formal theory of order, must, given that it is an interpreted logic (an interpreted calculus), systematically display the forms of order found in the modes of social life. What can and cannot be said, what follows from what, is dictated by the norms of intelligibility embedded in the modes of social life. These finally determine the criteria of logical appraisal.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Nielsen, 200.

¹¹⁹ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science (and its Relation to Philosophy)*, London: Routledge, 1958.

¹²⁰ Nielsen, 200.

It follows from this that one cannot apply the criteria of logic to ‘social life as such.’ Science has one criterion of intelligibility and religion another. An action is logical or illogical within science or within religion. “It would, for example, be illogical for a scientist working in a certain area to refuse to take cognizance of the results of a properly conducted experiment; and it would be illogical for a man who believed in God to try to pit his strength against God.”¹²¹ However, it makes no sense at all to assert that science or religion themselves are logical or illogical.

Nielsen claims that Winch is rightly understood as claiming the conceptual self-sufficiency of forms of life. This seems to further lead to the compartmentalization of modes of discourse and forms of life. “Winch is indeed saying that we cannot criticize science or ethics by criteria appropriate to religion, and vice-versa.”¹²² Each mode of discourse must be understood in its own terms, and relevant criticism can only be made from within that mode of discourse and not from outside of it.

Nielsen asks us to assume, just for a moment, that Winch is correct in his claim about the Azande: due to radically different conceptual structures in our languages, it does not make sense to say that our concept of reality is correct while the Azande’s is not. Even if we assume this claim is true, it does not follow that our religion and science are related in the way Azande magic is related to our scientific beliefs.

There is no ‘religious language’ and ‘scientific language.’...In short, ‘religious discourse’ and ‘scientific discourse’ are part of the same overall conceptual structure. Moreover, in that conceptual structure there is a large amount of discourse, which is neither religious nor scientific,

¹²¹ Ibid., 201.

¹²² Ibid., 201.

that is constantly being utilized by both the religious man and the scientist when they make religious or scientific claims. In short, they share a number of key categories.¹²³

We might concede to Winch that the Azande and we possess two very different conceptual structures based on different forms of life, but this relationship is entirely different from the one that holds between our religion and our science, which share a large amount of common discourse. Within our culture, it may be the case that a religious believer sees the language of Christian belief as talking about ‘ultimate reality,’ while Nielsen sees this language as ‘illusion-producing.’ “But all the same, there remains a sense in which we do understand each other and in which we share a massive background of beliefs and assumptions.”¹²⁴ In light of this fact, it is not apparent that there are no common grounds for arguing about which concepts of reality are correct.

Nielsen acknowledges that Winch is correct in holding the notion that scientific concepts alone can characterize objective reality is an incoherent one. Evans-Pritchard’s claim that ‘Scientific concepts alone make a true link with objective reality’ is neither analytic nor empirical. Moreover, Evans-Pritchard has indeed failed to give a use to ‘true link’ or ‘objective reality.’ But nevertheless, contends Nielsen,

When a plain man looks at a harvest moon and says that it is orange, or says that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, or that his vineyard posts are solid, he is not making scientific statements, but he is not making *subjective* statements either. His statements can be perfectly objective; they can be about how things are, and they can be objectively testable (publicly verifiable) without being scientific or without conflicting with science.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid., 201.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 202.

In a similar fashion, argues Nielsen, when people assert religious propositions, these claims must be open to possible confirmation and disconfirmation. “Their claims must be publicly testable.”¹²⁶

However, we find that religious propositions are not in fact publicly testable. “A claim like ‘God created the heavens and the earth,’ when ‘God’ is used non-anthropomorphically, is not testable. That is to say, it is a claim that purports to assert a fact, yet is devoid of a truth-value.”¹²⁷ According to Nielsen, while religious believers claim that religious propositions are factual assertions, they are unable, even in principle, to say how one would establish or disestablish these propositions. “Or to put this verificationist point in a weaker and more adequate way, if we cannot even say what in *principle* would count as *evidence* against the putative statement that God created the world, then ‘God created the world’ is devoid of factual content.”¹²⁸

According to Nielsen, Wittgensteinians will respond to this argument by claiming that the propositions in question are what Wittgenstein called grammatical remarks. In other words, these propositions “hold in virtue of the linguistic conventions governing the crucial terms in question.” However, ‘key religious utterances’ do purport to be factual claims, holds Nielsen. The problem is that they do not succeed in making what counts as a factual statement. “That is, as Strawson puts it, they are not actually part of that type of discourse we call fact-stating type of discourse. Thus they lack the kind of coherence

¹²⁶ Ibid., 203.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 203.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 203.

they must have to make genuinely factual claims.”¹²⁹ Nielsen acknowledges that this verificationist argument may be open to objection, but maintains that it is a ‘far more powerful’ argument than the claim that scientific ideas accord with objective reality, while it is also remains an unmet challenge to Wittgensteinian Fideism.

More recently, Nielsen has added additional arguments against both Malcolm and Winch.¹³⁰ The first argument takes aim at Malcolm’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s thought in relation to religion. Religions, claims Malcolm, are forms of life. “Religions, that is Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., are ancient and complex forms of life with their distinctive but purely contingent language-games.”¹³¹ Of course within these forms of life and their associated language-games, we can offer reasons and explanations. However, there is no grounding or justifications for them, that is, there is no metaphysical or theological foundation upon which they rest. If we are to follow the later Wittgenstein, we must accept that these religious forms of life and language-games exist and that there is no going outside of them. We can merely describe the practices that they entail.

But, argues Nielsen, “[Religions] are *inescapably in part metaphysical religiosities*.”¹³² There is an integral and ineliminable element of all religions that is metaphysical. We cannot remove this metaphysical aspect of religions and still be left with the same thing. Nielsen agrees that religion involves committing to a way of living

¹²⁹ Ibid., 203.

¹³⁰ Kai Nielsen, “Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion,” in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis. London: Routledge, 2001. 137-166.

¹³¹ Ibid., 144.

¹³² Ibid., 147.

and conducting one's life, but argues that religion also necessarily involves something more than this. Religions involve doctrines such as the existence of an ultimate spiritual being called God or belief that human beings have immortal souls.

The problem that we now face is this: Religions are language-games and forms of life, which Wittgenstein claimed could be neither justified nor criticized, but merely described. Religions are also metaphysical doctrines, which Wittgenstein claimed are confusions of language and incoherent 'houses of cards.'

If what Wittgenstein, Malcolm, Winch, and the pragmatists say is so, metaphysical belief systems are all incoherent...But...Christianity can't be incoherent, for Christianity, as other religions as well, is a language-game—an employment of language embedded in a pattern of human life—and thus a form of life. But forms of life and language-games cannot on Wittgenstein's account be incoherent or illusory or even, in any central or crucial way, in error. Such notions have no application with respect to forms of life.¹³³

Thus, concludes Nielsen, two central aspects of Wittgenstein's later thought, as applied to religion, are incompatible, leaving Malcolm's position untenable.

Taking aim at Winch's alternative reading of Wittgenstein, Nielsen offers a second set of arguments. Malcolm had taken Wittgenstein's claim that explanation must come to end to imply that explanations end at language-games. Winch has claimed that this is misleading. All we have to do is look to the work of anthropologists, historians, and others to see that social scientists offer us well founded explanations of various practices all the time. The important question to ask is what relevance the explanations offered by social scientists have for the kinds of problems that philosophers are concerned with. What ought to be argued from a Wittgensteinian standpoint, contends

¹³³ Ibid., 147-148.

Winch, is that these explanations are uninteresting and useless so far as philosophical problems are concerned.

In light of Winch's alternative interpretation of Wittgenstein's position, Nielsen asks,

If Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians...are right about the incoherence of metaphysics and foundationalist epistemology, then the rationalistic arguments of the philosophy of religion or natural theology or atheology cannot get off the ground. Then isn't the conclusion we should come to about religion such a Wittgensteinian one?¹³⁴

After all, Wittgenstein had emphasized that being religious was a matter of how one acted and oriented his or her life. Religion is not a matter of speculative reasoning.

Before we are too quick to embrace this Wittgensteinian conclusion about the nature of religion, warns Nielsen, there are two related arguments against this position. First, to understand religion in this way implies that all 'sensitive, reflective, and caring people' are religious people. Such an understanding commits the error of turning a *necessary* condition for being a religious person into a *sufficient* condition for being a religious person. Secondly, this way of understanding religion would imply that "...Marx, Engels, Luxembourg, Durkheim, Freud, Dewey, Weber, Gramsci, all become religious. But that is a *reductio*."¹³⁵ This understanding of religion would result in the conclusion that people who are outspoken critics of religion are themselves to be considered religious.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 155.

IV. Assessment

In this fourth and final section of this chapter, I will offer an evaluation and critique of the various interpretations and criticisms of Wittgenstein that have been considered. Let me begin by turning to the alternative interpretations offered by Malcolm and Winch. Regarding Wittgenstein's later philosophy in general, the primary issue of dispute between these interpreters seems to be how to locate or understand Wittgenstein's notion that explanation must come to an end. Malcolm sees language-games and their associated forms of life as the point at which Wittgenstein believed explanation comes to an end. Winch does not disagree with this claim, but feels that it needs a bit of qualification. According to Winch, Wittgenstein did not intend to say that no sort of explanation of language-games and forms of life are possible, but merely that explanations relevant to the concerns of philosophers are not possible.

To resolve this issue, it may be helpful to look at Wittgenstein's life as well as a passage from his writings. As Malcolm has pointed out, Wittgenstein was trained as an engineer in Germany, designed and built an experimental aircraft engine as a research student in aeronautics at Manchester, and spent his entire life interested in machines and how they function.¹³⁶ During WWII Wittgenstein served as a lab assistant in a medical facility that was conducting research on human shock. The medical doctor in charge was highly impressed with the relevance of Wittgenstein's questions and suggestions about the direction and methodology of the research. In the course of this work, Wittgenstein went on to develop a technique for determining the seriousness of wounds, as well as to

¹³⁶ Malcolm, 4.

design and construct an innovative apparatus for recording pulse pressure.¹³⁷ In light of these interests and endeavors, Malcolm concludes, “It would be wrong to think that Wittgenstein was in general hostile to explanations.”¹³⁸

The point I would like to make here is that Wittgenstein was involved in scientific research and development at a number of periods in his life. Malcolm is quite aware of this and acknowledges it in his essay. However, it is Winch’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s attitude toward explanation that seems more accurate in light of these undertakings. Wittgenstein did engage in scientific research, both in engineering and in the field of medicine. When Winch claims that Wittgenstein did not object to the idea that some sorts of scientific explanations of language-games and forms of life are possible, this seems in keeping with Wittgenstein’s own participation in scientific projects. If Wittgenstein’s belief that explanation must come to an end entailed skepticism about the possibility of scientific explanation, then he would not have engaged in these scientific projects. Therefore, as Winch has argued, it seems likely that Wittgenstein would indeed accept that the hard and soft sciences may offer explanations of certain aspects of language-games and forms of life. The issue, as Winch has pointed out, is whether these explanations say anything about kinds of answers philosophers tend to seek.

¹³⁷ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990. 453.

¹³⁸ Malcolm, 3.

I would like to draw attention to a passage from the *Tractatus*, one which may shed some light on Wittgenstein's attitude toward science. At 6.371 and 6.372 we find the following:

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages.

And in fact both are right and both are wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained.¹³⁹

In this passage Wittgenstein points out that the moderns act as though everything is explained by science, as though science has made all other forms of explanation irrelevant. We notice that Wittgenstein does not hold science to be unable to offer any explanations, but he is opposed to the idea that science explains everything. Science may be capable of offering some perfectly well-founded explanations of certain aspects of language-games or forms of life. However, philosophers typically search for necessary explanations. Science is incapable of providing this type of explanation. It is where this type of philosophical explanation is concerned that explanation must come to an end at language-games and forms of life. Language-games provide the criteria of explanation, and there is nothing necessary about language-games. Wittgenstein's intention was to diagnose the sources of philosophical perplexity and to show that these sorts of explanation cannot be had.

The other primary interpretative issue of the dispute between Malcolm and Winch is how to understand Wittgenstein's remark, "While I am not a religious man, I cannot

¹³⁹ *Tractatus*, 85.

help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.” Malcolm interprets the remark to imply that there are analogies which hold between a religious point of view and Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Winch resists this understanding of the remark, looking instead to a common attitude that Wittgenstein held towards both religion and philosophy.

I think that Winch is correct to resist Malcolm’s search for analogies. It is true that Wittgenstein neither mentions analogy in his remark, nor specifies *philosophical* problems as the ones he has in mind. A browse through Wittgenstein’s writings will immediately reveal that there are many other problems besides philosophical ones that Wittgenstein might be said to have seen from a religious or quasi-religious point of view. Therefore, there seems no good reason for confining the application of this remark to philosophical problems.

More important, however, is Winch’s contention that if this remark is interpreted as implying that there are analogies between a religious point of view and other sorts of problems that Wittgenstein considered, then we are in danger of losing our grip on any manageable issue. There would be no end to the analogies that might be drawn between a religious point of view and the various problems that Wittgenstein considered. Winch claims that in order to keep the analogy project a manageable one, Malcolm’s interpretations rests on the assumption that Wittgenstein meant *philosophical* problems in his remark. However, I do not believe that Malcolm’s interpretation fares well even if we assume that Wittgenstein meant *philosophical* problems in his remark. The following considerations will suggest why this is so.

Malcolm claimed to have found four analogies between a religious point of view and the philosophical problems that Wittgenstein considered. These analogies include, 1) a certain attitude toward explanation, 2) a wonder at the existence of things, 3) a notion of sickness or disease, and 4) an emphasis on acting or doing. However, Phillip R. Shields would both add further analogies to this list, as well as contest some of Malcolm's characterizations of these analogies.¹⁴⁰ For example, Shields finds an analogy between the will of God and logical and grammatical form in Wittgenstein's philosophy. "...From the time of the first surviving notebooks Wittgenstein treated logical, and later grammatical, form as though it was analogous to the will of God, and in this way logic provided a standard of judgment which was absolute and could serve as a measure of our 'sins.'"¹⁴¹ Shields would add this analogy to the list as one that Malcolm has overlooked.

Further, Shields would accuse Malcolm of mischaracterizing some of the analogies. This applies to Malcolm's third analogy involving the idea of sickness or sin. According to Shields, the analogy in this respect is between sin and certain elements of language, as discussed in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Following *Philosophical Investigations* 109 where Wittgenstein states, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language," Shields remarks, "[Wittgenstein] repeatedly speaks of being 'seduced' by logic, 'misled' by grammar, and 'tempted' by

¹⁴⁰ Phillips R. Shields, *Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Shields makes no mention of Malcolm's analogies in this work, as it was published virtually simultaneously with Malcolm's essay.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

both appearances and ideals.”¹⁴² For Shields the analogy is between original sin as a feature of our world and Wittgenstein’s notion that something is amiss and seductive about certain aspects of our language. On Shield’s account Malcolm got it wrong. Where Malcolm holds the analogy to be between ‘sin’ or ‘sickness’ and something amiss in our *intellects* that leads us to philosophical confusion, Shields holds the analogy to be between sin and elements of our *language* that lead us to these problems.

Shields would both add other analogies to the list, as well as dispute other characterizations with Malcolm. Ultimately, Shields finds in Wittgenstein’s philosophy “a picture that is broadly Judeo-Christian, usually Augustinian and frequently Calvinist.”¹⁴³ The point here is that the project of searching for analogies between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and a religious point of view does not seem to be a successful approach. One could constantly point to new potential analogies, and irresolvable disputes will remain about how to properly construe the currently proposed analogies.

Winch suggests that Wittgenstein’s remark be interpreted as referring to a common attitude that Wittgenstein brought to both religious and philosophical issues. He describes this attitude as involving a passion for clarity. For Wittgenstein clarity about religious and philosophical issues is of the utmost importance to a person who is concerned with these issues. I believe that this interpretive tactic presents a much more successful approach.

¹⁴² Ibid., 5.

¹⁴³ Ibid., x.

Wittgenstein discussed the attitude he thought was necessary to write meaningfully about philosophical matters. In Ray Monk's celebrated biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Monk discusses this attitude in the following passage:

...For Wittgenstein, *all* philosophy, in so far as it is pursued honestly and decently, begins with a confession. He often remarked that the problem of writing good philosophy and of thinking well about philosophical problems was one of the will more than the intellect—the will to resist temptation to misunderstand, the will to resist superficiality. What gets in the way of genuine understanding is often not one's lack of intelligence, but the presence of one's pride. Thus: 'The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work.' The self-scrutiny demanded by such a dismantling of one's pride is necessary, not only to be a decent person, but also to write decent philosophy. 'If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself, because this is too painful, he will remain superficial in his writing.'¹⁴⁴

In this description we see an attitude that is a prerequisite for a genuinely religious life, is also an attitude that Wittgenstein felt must be brought to philosophizing. If a person is to write genuine and worthwhile philosophy, then he must do so in a spirit that is confessional and humble, and in a manner that involves the relinquishing of pride. While the focus here is on writing philosophy, we also notice that Wittgenstein mentions the possibility of one's writing in general remaining superficial. Thus, Wittgenstein felt that this sort of attitude must be brought to any sort of writing whatsoever if that writing is to have any merit. It is this belief of Wittgenstein, that one must embody a quasi-religious type of attitude in order to consider problems in a genuine manner, which prompted him to remark that he could not help seeing every problem from a religious point of view. The same confessional attitude that is required of a religious person, is an attitude which Wittgenstein believed must be brought to all endeavors in life, if those undertakings were to have any genuine merit.

¹⁴⁴ Monk, 366.

Next, I will consider Nielsen's criticisms of Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, the position he labels 'Wittgensteinian Fideism.' Nielsen's first criticism involves the contention that first-order religious discourse is not in order as it stands. Nielsen argues for this contention by pointing out that in all societies there have been people who know very well how to play the religious language-game of their culture, yet refuse to participate in this language-game because they find its discourse to be incoherent. In contrast, he points to 'material object' language, a discourse that is claimed not to precipitate this sort of controversy.

Let me begin by responding to the contention that 'material object' discourse does not lead to the same sorts of controversies as religious discourse. There are certainly instances in 'material object' discourse where controversy does arise. Consider the concept 'human being.' A central issue in contemporary moral debate is whether the concept 'human being' refers to the material object that is a fetus. This is just one example, showing that 'material object' discourse may not be as uncontroversial as Nielsen assumes.

More importantly, however, we need to ask what Nielsen means when he says that people have come to find religious discourse 'incoherent.' Does he mean that these people have come to disbelief? We do find people who were raised religious and later reject these beliefs, as well as people who convert to a religion at one point in their lives and later renounce this conversion. But do these people come to find first-order religious discourse 'incoherent'? I believe that Nielsen is misconstruing what occurs on these

occasions. The issue involves transitioning from one perspective to another, rather than coming to find religious discourse incoherent.

In his *Lecture on Religious Belief*, Wittgenstein speaks of the relationship between the believer and unbeliever in the following passage:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgment,' and I said: 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly.' You would say there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said 'There is a German aeroplane overhead,' and I said 'Possibly I'm not so sure,' you'd say we were fairly near.¹⁴⁵

When Wittgenstein argues that there is an 'enormous gulf' between the believer and unbeliever, he is arguing that they are "on an entirely different plane." In contrast, two people who disagree about whether there is a German airplane overhead are said to be fairly near. This is because the people discussing the airplane share a framework of reference, while the people who disagree about whether there will be a Last judgment are coming from entirely different frames of reference. The point is that people who were formerly religious and then come to disbelief have come to see the world from an entirely different perspective. It is not a matter of these people coming to find religious discourse incoherent or confused, as Nielsen suggests. Thus, Nielsen's argument for first-order religious discourse being in disorder is based on a mischaracterization of what is entailed in going from belief to disbelief.

In connection with this argument, Nielsen points out that more and more people in our own culture are coming to disbelief. He mentions that people once believed in fairies, but that this belief has gone out of existence because people found discourse

¹⁴⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966. 53.

about fairies incoherent or confused. Religion, he suggests, is succumbing to the same fate because people are seeing it as a similarly incoherent discourse. Again, I would argue, this is a matter of change in perspective or frame of reference, as opposed to people finding discourse about fairies incoherent. Just as a change in perspective caused the total demise of belief in fairies, it is always possible that this sort of change could bring religious belief to an end. But what has happened in this case is that people have ceased to appeal to a certain perspective. It is not a matter of coming to see a discourse as incoherent.

Nielsen's second argument against Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion involves the notion of alternative conceptual schemes. Even if we concede that we and the Azande have such different conceptual schemes that we are unable to judge the 'reality' of Azande magical practices, argues Nielsen, this says nothing about the relationship between our science and religion. We do not have a 'scientific language' and a 'religious language.' Our science and religion take place in a common language and share many overlapping concepts. Thus, the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion is unable to claim that science is an alternative conceptual scheme, one that is unable to assess religion according to its criteria. Nielsen goes on to argue that religious statements purport to be factual claims, but do not possess a truth-value. The problem with religious statements is that they are not publicly verifiable, a necessary feature of any factual claim.

In response to this argument, one can raise the traditional objection to verificationism, namely, that the principle of verification (a statement must be publicly

testable or verifiable in order to be factual) is neither analytic nor empirical. However, it may be more important to consider Wittgenstein's comparison of language and games. Wittgenstein made this comparison in order to comment on the unity of language. It makes no sense to say that language is a unified whole, just as it makes no sense to say that chess, football, etc. are part of one 'super-game.' While religion and science may have some linguistic concepts in common, this does not show that these two language-games have a formal unity. Nielsen speaks as though a common measure of meaningfulness must apply to these language-games because they occur within the same culture. However, these are two different practices, each having its own criterion of meaningfulness.

The more recent arguments offered by Nielsen provide a third and a fourth argument against Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. The first of these involves Nielsen's contention that religions are necessarily metaphysical religiosities. A problem arises because Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion consider religions to be language-games or forms of life, things Wittgenstein held to be beyond criticism and which philosophy could merely describe. However, it is also true that religions are metaphysical systems, which Wittgenstein held to be incoherent 'houses of cards.' Thus, two central aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy are incompatible when applied to the issue of religion.

The problem with this argument is Nielsen's insistence that religions are metaphysical systems. Let us consider some passages from Wittgenstein's *Lecture on*

Religious Belief to see why this is so. In the following passage, Wittgenstein speaks of the nature of religious belief.

Suppose somebody made this guidance for this life: believing in the Last Judgment. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not?

Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for his whole life.

This is a very much stronger fact—foregoing pleasures, always appealing to this picture. This in one sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs, because the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on account of things which are far better established for him. Although he distinguishes between things well-established and not well-established.¹⁴⁶

In this passage we find an account of the manner in which religious belief is held and the way in which it operates within the believer's life. Wittgenstein claims that religious belief serves as a picture which the religious believer always has before him and which regulates the conduct of his life. Further, we see that while the religious believer normally distinguishes between well-established beliefs and not well-established beliefs in the same manner as the non-believer, religious belief is held in a special way by the believer. In one sense we might say that this is the firmest held belief that the religious believer has. The believer is willing to regulate his entire life based upon this belief. Wittgenstein calls this type of belief 'unshakeable.' On the other hand, it is said that other of his beliefs are far better established for the believer. For example, propositions about his immediate empirical experiences are far better established as far as the normal sense of well-established beliefs is concerned. What we learn from Wittgenstein's reflections on the nature of religious belief is that, rather than a metaphysical system, religious belief is a sort of picture that regulates the believer's life.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

More could be said about the notion of religious belief functioning as a 'picture.' Let me provide some examples to illustrate. The 'picture' may take the form of a model. For example, the life of Jesus may provide a model of how the Christian is to live. This model comes to mind when the Christian is reflecting on how to conduct him or herself. Alternatively, this picture could take the form of an image of God pointing at and judging or condemning the believer when he does wrong. The point is that there is no one form which this 'picture' must take.

Nielsen will obviously object that this is to misconstrue what is involved in religion---religion is necessarily a metaphysical religiosity. However, in the passage just cited we notice that Wittgenstein responds to this. Wittgenstein states that religious belief is not held because someone says they have metaphysical or some other kind of proof. Religious belief is not held because the believer engaged in some sort of reasoning or because they can cite certain grounds for his belief. This is because this sort of reasoning or evidence could not cause one to regulate his or her life in the way that religious belief functions. Religious belief is held by faith.

Another passage from the *Lecture on Religious Belief* may help us to understand how faith functions in the context of religious belief. In this passage Wittgenstein addresses the issue of whether religious belief is held on the basis of historical evidence.

It has been said that Christianity rests on an historic basis.

It has been said a thousand times by intelligent people that indubitability is not enough in this case. Even if there is as much evidence as for Napoleon. Because indubitability wouldn't be enough to make me change my whole life.

It doesn't rest on an historic basis in the sense that the ordinary belief in historic facts could serve as a foundation.

Here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts. Even, they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions.

Those people who had faith didn't apply the doubt which would ordinarily apply to *any* historical propositions. Especially propositions of a long time past, etc.¹⁴⁷

Religious belief is not held on the basis of probability or indubitability. Evidence for this belief would not be sufficient to give it the role it plays in a believer's life. While religious belief is in some sense based upon a historical basis, the believer does not apply the evidential standards that would be applied to a normal historical event. The normal standards of doubt are not applied in this situation. This is because religious belief is held on the basis of faith. Faith does not involve probability and evidence. As Wittgenstein puts it, faith requires someone to hold a belief through 'thick and thin,' even in spite of the evidence. When we look closely at the nature of religious belief, we see that Nielsen is mistaken in his insistence that religious belief is a belief in something inherently metaphysical. Instead, religious belief ought to be understood as a kin to a picture, one which regulated the life of the believer.

Nielsen's fourth and final argument is intended to follow up on this Wittgensteinian insight into the nature of religious belief. Nielsen claims that if religion merely involves acting and orienting one's life in a certain manner, then all 'sensitive, reflecting, and caring people' are religious. This commits the fallacy, argues Nielsen, of turning a necessary condition for being religious into a sufficient one. Moreover, this way of understanding religion implies that people who were opponents of religion are themselves religious.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

Both parts of this argument can be dealt with by making an important point. In his earlier article, “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” Nielsen claimed to agree with Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion that one must have a participant’s understanding of religion in order to understand religious practices. This, he held, was an important and correct insight that anthropologists have argued in favor of for years. In this final argument, however, Nielsen seems to contradict his earlier agreement with anthropologists and Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. He claims that the Wittgensteinian way of understanding religion implies that all ‘sensitive, reflecting, and caring people’ are religious, and that persons such as ‘Marx, Engles,....Freud, etc.,’ who were staunch opponents of religion, are themselves religious. But not all sensitive and caring people are people who have a participant’s understanding of religion. We might argue that this is the case with Marx, Engles, Freud, etc. In this case, Nielsen’s argument seems to contradict the earlier commitment he had made.

But let us suppose that Marx, Engles, Freud, and the others mentioned, were familiar enough with the religious discourse of Europe to have a participant’s understanding. On a Wittgensteinian understanding of religion, we would still notice that these thinkers did not function with appeal to a religious picture. The mere fact that they were sensitive and caring does not mean that they acted in this manner with appeal to a religious picture. Nielsen is wrong to claim that the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion turns a necessary condition for being religious into a sufficient one. A primary insight of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is that religious belief functions as an

appeal to a picture, and this condition is certainly not met in the case of Marx, Engels, Freud, and the others mentioned.

In this chapter we have considered Wittgenstein's personal attitude toward religion and the relation of his thought to this issue. This relationship does not entail analogies between Wittgenstein's philosophy and a religious point of view, but rather a confessional attitude which belongs to religious belief is one that Wittgenstein felt must also be brought to the practice of philosophy. We have also explored the accusation of Wittgensteinian Fideism leveled by Kai Nielsen. I argued that Nielsen's critique rests on a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion as well as a misunderstanding of the nature of religion belief itself. In the next chapter we will more deeply examine the application of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to the issue of religious belief, through consideration of a leading Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion.

Chapter 3

In this final chapter I will consider in more detail the contribution of Wittgenstein's philosophy to the philosophy of religion. While the concept 'language-game' plays a central role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it is not clear whether Wittgenstein would consider religion to be a distinctive language-game, or if he would, whether religion ought to be considered as such. I will begin by considering some arguments from D. Z. Phillips, perhaps the leading Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion. Phillips, while cautious, believes there are reasons that religious beliefs ought to be considered a distinctive language-game. Next, I will turn to Mark Addis, a critic of Phillips' treatment of religious belief as a distinct language-game. Finally, I will look at an argument from Gareth Moore challenging the notion that Wittgenstein has made a contribution to the philosophy of religion, as opposed to theological or spiritual understanding.

I. Phillips

D. Z. Phillips¹⁴⁸ suggests that criticism of treating religious beliefs as distinctive language-games comes primarily from two directions. From one direction, critics argue that treating religious belief as a language-game makes it seem like an isolated, esoteric game, which is of little significance outside the internal formalities of the religious activity itself. Treating religious beliefs as distinctive language-games, argue these

¹⁴⁸ D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Belief and Language-Games," in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, ed. D. Z. Phillips. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. 56-78.

critics, makes it difficult to explain why people should *cherish* these beliefs as they do. From the other direction comes the suspicion that religious belief is being placed outside the reach of any possible criticism. The appeal to the internality of religious criteria of meaningfulness is seen as a justification for something that would otherwise be considered nonsense. Nielsen is of course among this second variety of critic.

Turning to the first type of critic, Phillips points out the central concern of these philosophers is that the importance of religious belief must be established. According to these critics, this sense of importance will be conveyed by giving people reasons why they ought to believe in God. By offering reasons, it is held, religious belief will be shown to be reasonable. Phillips contends that it is difficult to understand what would be involved in such an enterprise.

To explain the difficulty, Phillips points to a passage from Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics.' In this passage Wittgenstein distinguishes between absolute judgments of value and relative judgments of value.

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said, 'Well, you play pretty badly,' and suppose I answered, 'I know I play badly, but I don't want to play any better,' all the other man could say would be: 'Ah, then that's all right.' But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said, 'You're behaving like a beast,' and then I were to say, 'I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better,' could he then say, 'Ah, then that's all right,?' Certainly not; he would say, 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.' Here you have an absolute judgment of value whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment.¹⁴⁹

This passage shows that there is both an absolute and a relative use of 'ought.' The relative value judgment holds true only in situations where one desires the consequences that follow from the value judgment. An example of a relative value judgment would be,

¹⁴⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics,' *Philosophical Review*, January 1965, 5.

‘It is *important* not to catch cold.’ Assuming one does not want the unpleasant consequences of catching a cold, this value judgment is true. However, relative value judgments are reversible, so long as one does not desire the consequences that follow from them. Taking the previous example, for instance, ‘It is not important that I do not catch a cold, since I don’t care about feeling unpleasant.’ Absolute judgments of value, on the other hand, are held absolutely and are not reversible.

When this first variety of critic contends that religious belief must be shown to be important, Phillips asks, following Wittgenstein’s distinction, whether they are using ‘important’ in an absolute or a relative sense? It often seems as if these critics are using a relative sense of importance.

We are told to believe in God because he is the most powerful being. We are told to believe in God because only those who believe will flourish in the end. We are told to believe in God because history is in His hand, and that, despite appearances, the final victory is His. All these advocacies are founded on relative judgments of value.¹⁵⁰

As noted above, however, relative judgments of value are reversible. “If the Devil happened to be more powerful than God, he would have to be worshipped. If believers are not to flourish in the end, belief becomes pointless. Belief in God is pointless if historical development goes in one direction rather than another.”¹⁵¹ It seems, according to these critics, that belief in God is important only if certain consequences follow.

But this falsifies the absolute character that belief in God has for many believers. “[These believers] would say that God’s divinity cannot be justified by external considerations. If we can see nothing in it, there is nothing apart from it which will

¹⁵⁰ Phillips, 58.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 58.

somehow establish its point.”¹⁵² To put this in another way, we might ask: if a person is urged to believe in God, and he asks why, what more is there to say? Phillips holds that if a person were told of certain consequences that would result from not believing in God, and this person came to believe because of these consequences, then this would not in fact be belief in God. “[This person] would have a policy, not a faith,” argues Phillips.

There is yet another important challenge faced by this first variety of critic. These critics seem unable to give an account of the distinction between other-worldliness and worldliness, a highly important distinction in most religions. This distinction cannot be accounted for when there is an assumption that the value of religious belief can be assessed by applying a wider common measure. Phillips asks us to consider the following arguments:

- (1) We should believe in God. He is the most powerful of all beings. We are all to be judged by him in the end. He is to determine our fate. In this argument there is only one concept of power: worldly power. As *it happens*, God is more powerful than we are, but it is the same kind of power.
- (2) Many battles are fought. At times it looks as if the good is defeated and evil triumphs. But there is no reason to fear: the ultimate victory is God’s. Here a common measure is applied to God and the powers of evil, as if God’s victory is demonstrable, something recognized by good and evil alike. The man who says God is not victorious would be contradicting the man who says he is victorious.¹⁵³

These apologetic moves remind one of the exchanges between Polus and Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*. Polus fails to understand Socrates’ claim that goodness is to a man’s advantage. He points to the Tyrant of Macedonia, a man who is wicked, but has flourished. Here Polus is making the mistake of assuming that Socrates can mean only one thing by advantage, namely, what Polus himself means by it. “For Socrates,

¹⁵² Ibid., 59.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 59.

however, it is not the world's view of advantage which is to determine what is good, but what is good which is to determine what is to count as advantage."¹⁵⁴

The apologetic arguments above claim that God is more powerful than the forces which oppose God. On these accounts, it is one and the same concept of power that is possessed by both God and these forces. God and the world share the same kind of power, God just happens to have more of it. "But, like Polus, [these critics] need to realize that for many believers it is not the outcome, the course of events, which is to determine whether God is victorious, but faith in God which determines what is regarded as victory. If it were not so, there would be no tension between the world's way of regarding matters and religious reactions to them."¹⁵⁵ For religious believers 'success' is determined by what God holds to be important, and in certain situations this will be different from what the world holds to be 'success.' Phillips' intention is not to advocate for either side, but merely to show that any account of religious beliefs denying that such a tension exists ends up falsifying the nature of the beliefs in question.

This first variety of critic worries that treating religious belief as a distinctive language-game will result in making religion out to be an unimportant esoteric game. However, if not careful, the attempt to show that religious belief is important may result in distorting the values involved in such beliefs. The source of these distortions lies in seeking an external justification for religious belief.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 60.

While the first group of critics is generally comprised of philosophers sympathetic to religion, the second group of critics is comprised of philosophers both sympathetic and unsympathetic to religion. This second group of critics attempt to show their conclusions are reached by criteria of rationality which their opponents do or ought to accept.

“Unless believers and non-believers can be shown to be using common criteria of rationality, it is said, then the misgivings about religious beliefs being esoteric games cannot be avoided.”¹⁵⁶

Phillips looks largely to Wittgenstein’s “Lecture on Religious Belief”¹⁵⁷ to answer this second variety of critic. He reminds us that Wittgenstein asked whether the believer and non-believer contradict each other when one says he believes and the other says he does not. In order to contradict each other, Wittgenstein argues, these two people must share a common understanding; they must be playing the same game. “The man who says that the sun is 90 million miles away from the earth contradicts the man who says that the sun is only 20 million miles away from the earth...The man who says that unicorns exist contradicts the man who says there are no unicorns.”¹⁵⁸ In these instances, the participants share a common understanding. “The disputants about the distance of the sun from the earth share a common understanding—namely, methods of calculation in astronomy...The disputants about the unicorns share a common understanding—namely,

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religion*, ed. Cyril Barrett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 61.

methods of verifying the existence of various kinds of animals.”¹⁵⁹ The participants in these disputes appeal to the same criteria to settle disagreements. In other words, they are ‘one in logic.’ We might say they are playing the same game, because they are referring to a common set of rules.

The question is whether the believer and the non-believer, who are disputing the existence of God, are similar to these disputants. Wittgenstein shows that they are not. “The main reason for the difference is that God’s reality is not one of a kind; He is not a being among beings. The word ‘God’ is not the name of a thing.”¹⁶⁰ The consequence of this is that God cannot be assessed by a common measure which applies to things other than God. But what is meant by the claim that ‘God is not the name of a thing’?

If one says that something exists, it makes sense to think of that thing ceasing to exist. However, we would not say that God might cease to exist. This is not because believers think God will exist forever, but because it makes no sense to speak of God ceasing to exist. We also notice that believers hold it a terrible thing not to believe in the existence of God. The peculiarity here, as Wittgenstein points out, is that ordinarily one would never hold it a terrible thing not to believe in the existence of some object. We might also question why there is such a fuss about this belief. After all, religious believers only *believe* these things to be true. In normal situations we might say, ‘You

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 62.

only believe—Oh, well...’ “But, is it not queer to say of worshippers, ‘They only believe there is a God’?”¹⁶¹

Phillips points out that these critics are not unaware of the differences between talk of ordinary objects and talk of God. However, they see these differences as indicative of serious blunders that have been committed in the name of religion. “Once the differences are seen as blunders, it is assumed that what are sometimes called ‘the logical peculiarities’ of religious discourse are deviations from or distortions of non-religious ways of speaking with which we are familiar.”¹⁶² It follows from this that the reality of God is made subject to wider criteria of intelligibility. As with the hypothesis about the distance of the sun from the earth, or the existence of unicorns, beliefs about God are thought to have a reality relative to the criteria by which they are assessed. “In the case of religious beliefs, it is said that when they are brought into relation with the relevant criteria of assessment they are shown to be mistakes, distortions, illusions, or blunders.”¹⁶³

Wittgenstein felt that this conclusion arose, at least in part, from a deep philosophical prejudice. “One characteristic of this prejudice is the craving for generality, the insistence that what constitutes an intelligible move in one context must constitute an intelligible move in all contexts.”¹⁶⁴ In terms of the topic we have been discussing, this prejudice takes the form of illegitimately elevating *one* use of the words

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶² Ibid., 62.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 63.

‘existence’ or ‘belief’ as a paradigm for *any* use of these words. In his ‘Lecture on Religious Belief,’ Wittgenstein is giving us reasons to note the different use that ‘existence’ and ‘belief’ have in this context, and to resist the craving for generality.

One form this craving takes within philosophical discussions of religion is the notion that nothing can be believed unless there is evidence or grounds for that belief. There certainly are beliefs relating to religion where grounds and evidence are relevant, such as the belief in the authenticity of a holy relic, for example. But it does not make sense to ask for the evidence or grounds of every religious belief.

Wittgenstein considers belief in the Last Judgment. We might ask what evidence there is for this belief. Some people are sure it will occur, others think possibly it will occur, and yet others believe it will not occur. The Last Judgment seems to be thought of as a future event which will or will not occur. “We can say, as we did earlier, that the disputants are one in logic....Those who feel sure it will occur, those who think it might possibly occur, and those who think it will not occur are all, logically, on the same level.”¹⁶⁵ These people seem to be playing the same game and expressing belief, half-belief, or unbelief in a hypothesis.

But must religious belief be taken as a hypothesis? Certainly not. Wittgenstein points out that the word ‘God’ is among the earliest learnt. While we learn it by means of pictures, stories, catechisms, etc., Wittgenstein warns that this does not have the ‘same consequences as with pictures of aunts.’ “I wasn’t shown (that which the picture

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 63.

pictured).”¹⁶⁶ Wittgenstein remarks further on this picture of God in the following passage:

Take ‘God created man.’ Pictures of Michelangelo showing the creation of the world. In general, there is nothing which explains the meanings of words as well as a picture, and I take it that Michelangelo was as good as anyone can be and did his best, and here is the picture of the Deity creating Adam.

If we ever saw this, we certainly wouldn’t think this the Deity. The picture has to be used in an entirely different way if we are to call the man in that queer blanket ‘God’, and so on. You could imagine that religion was taught by means of these pictures. ‘Of course we can only express ourselves by means of pictures.’ This is rather queer...I could show Moore the pictures of a tropical plant. There is a technique of comparison between picture and plant. If I showed him the picture of Michelangelo and said, ‘Of course, I can’t show you the real thing, only the picture’...The absurdity is, I’ve never taught him the technique of using this picture.¹⁶⁷

The primary point of this passage is to show that the difference between the believer and non-believer is like the difference between someone who does and someone who does not believe in a picture.

Does believing in a picture amount to believing in a hypothesis? It does not. As Wittgenstein points out, “The whole *weight* may be in the picture.”¹⁶⁸ Religious belief lies in the power of the picture itself. “A man’s belief in the Last Judgment may show itself in the way a man has this before his mind when he takes any decisions of importance, in the way it determines his attitude to his aspirations and failures, or to the fortunes or misfortunes which befall him.”¹⁶⁹ Wittgenstein is stressing the grammar of religious belief, what ‘recognition of belief’ amounts to in this context. It does not involve reasoning or weighing evidence to reach a conclusion. Rather, what is involved is seeing how the belief regulates a person’s life. Wittgenstein describes this as follows:

¹⁶⁶ Wittgenstein, 60.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶⁹ Phillips, 64.

Here believing obviously plays much more this role: suppose we said that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it. Here an enormous difference would be between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just don't use it at all.¹⁷⁰

The issue now becomes whether the people who do not use this picture contradict those who do. Wittgenstein argues in the following passage that they do not contradict each other.

Suppose someone is ill and he says: 'This is a punishment', and I say: 'If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all.' If you say, 'Do you believe the opposite?'—you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures. It is this way: if someone said, 'Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as a punishment, so what do you believe?'—I'd say: 'I don't have any thoughts of punishment.'¹⁷¹

We see that believing in the picture means putting one's trust in it, sacrificing for it, letting it regulate one's life, whereas not believing in the picture means it plays no role in one's thinking. Those who do not use the picture cannot be compared with someone who does not believe in a hypothesis. It is not that they contradict the picture, but rather, they simply do not use it at all.

A religious belief, such as belief in the Last Judgment, is not a testable hypothesis but is an absolute for a believer in so far as it predominates and determines much of the believer's thinking. "The absolute beliefs are the criteria, not the object of assessment."¹⁷² If these beliefs provide the criteria by which other things in the believer's life are evaluated, then the character of these beliefs is falsified in so far as

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁷² Phillips, 65.

they are construed as hypotheses. Wittgenstein remarks, “The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business.”¹⁷³

The difficulty lies in seeing what would be meant by saying that absolute religious beliefs are actually mistakes or blunders. According to Wittgenstein, a blunder must occur within a particular system. “Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another.”¹⁷⁴ For example, when someone has been asked to go on in the same way, and continues the series 2, 4, 6, 8, 10... by repeating it, we can see what blunder has been committed. However, Wittgenstein points out, if someone said they were going to add, and then wrote on the board ‘2 and 21 is 13,’ “I’d say: ‘There is no blunder.’”¹⁷⁵ We would not say this person had committed a blunder in adding, but that he or she was not adding at all. By comparison, Wittgenstein imagines someone who had a dream of the Last Judgment and then says he knows what it must be like. If we imagine this to be like assessing next week’s weather, it would be strange to think of the dream as slender evidence. Wittgenstein goes on, “If you compare it with anything in science which we call evidence, you can’t credit that anyone could soberly argue: ‘Well, I had this dream...therefore...Last Judgment.’ You might say, ‘For a blunder, that’s too big.’”¹⁷⁶ In such a situation, we might say this believer was joking or insane. The question which arises is precisely that raised by the second group of critics: “How do we know that

¹⁷³ Wittgenstein, 56.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 61-62.

religious practices are not forms of disguised nonsense which, for some reason or another, believers do not recognize as such?”¹⁷⁷

Thus far Phillips has responded to critics who resist characterizing religious belief as a distinctive language-game, either because they want to show that religious belief is important as one might show a course of action to be prudential, or because they want to show the rationality or irrationality of religious belief by assuming the existence of God to be established by reference to criteria under which it is one instance among many. Both of these attempts, argues Phillips, falsify the absolute character of the belief in question.

However, it may still be argued against Phillips, that his view allows religious believers to say whatever they like. This criticism is strengthened both by the notion that language-games have an internal criteria of intelligibility and by the notion that it is impossible to render one language-game unintelligible in terms of the criteria of another. In response to these critics, it may be pointed out that a religious believer can make a mistake within his or her religion. After all, there are criteria of intelligibility for what can and cannot be said within religious practice. But these critics may press further. They may point to the possibility of an internally consistent, but pointless, set of rules. “To argue, therefore, that religious beliefs are distinctive language-games with rules which their adherents may follow or fail to follow does not, of itself, show that the rules have any point.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Phillips, 66.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

Phillips finds this last criticism justified. It points to a strain in the analogy between religious belief and language-games. One does not show why people should cherish religious belief merely by distinguishing religious belief from other modes of social life, even though important distinctions are to be made here. If religious belief is thought of as cut off from other modes of social life, then it could not have the importance that it has. The work of Rush Rhees¹⁷⁹ has assisted Phillips in coming to understand the full implications of this point.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thought that all propositions must have a general propositional form. Later, in the *Investigations*, while Wittgenstein had relinquished the idea of ‘all propositions,’ he continued to be interested in what belonging to a common language meant. Rhees responds:

When he says that any language is a family of language-games, and that any of these might be a complete language by itself, he does not say whether people who might take part in several such games would be speaking the same language in each of them. In fact, I find it hard to see on this view that they would *ever* be speaking a language.¹⁸⁰

One reason for Rhees’ conclusion is that Wittgenstein makes the assumption that the same language is being spoken in each of the different language-games. “But if this is so the sameness or unity of that language cannot be explained by describing the way in which any *particular* language-game is played.”¹⁸¹ The problem becomes more acute when Wittgenstein claims that each language-game could be a complete language in itself. One reason for Wittgenstein’s argument for the completeness of language-games

¹⁷⁹ Rush Rhees, “Wittgenstein’s Builders,” *Discussions of Wittgenstein*. New York: Schocken Books. 71-84.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁸¹ Phillips, 67-68.

was to rid us of the notion that there is a general propositional form. There is no one propositional form which underwrites all usages in a language. In other words, the various language-games do not comprise one big game. However, “Wittgenstein wants to say that a language, the same language, *is* a family of language-games—that is, that this is the kind of unity a language has.”¹⁸² It is at this point that we encounter a strain in the analogy between language and a game.

At the beginning of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein presents a hypothetical discussion about a group of builders. He suggests that an entire language of a tribe might be comprised of orders and response, constituted by one man shouting ‘Slab!’ and another bringing a slab. Rhees comments on this hypothetical situation as follows:

But I feel that there is something wrong here. The trouble is not to imagine a people with a language of such limited vocabulary. The trouble is to imagine that they spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all. I do not think it would be speaking a language.¹⁸³

Wittgenstein imagines the adults of the tribe teaching the children the shouts for a slab. But this would not be a part of the order and response of the actual job itself. Further, there must be other situations that take place outside the basic work of the job. People would likely go home and discuss work with their families. Snags will sometimes occur in the course of the work, which have to be dealt with. Rhees argues that Wittgenstein is describing something more like a game of building with stones, correct methods of reacting to signals, as opposed to people actually building a house. Rhees’ point is that learning a language cannot be identified with learning what is generally done. “It has

¹⁸² Ibid., 68.

¹⁸³ Rhees, 76.

more to do with what it makes sense to answer or what it makes sense to ask, or what sense one remark may have in connection to another.”¹⁸⁴ The meaning of the builder’s expressions cannot be entirely with the job. “We should not be able to grasp the meaning of expressions, see the bearing of one expression on another, appreciate why something can be said here and not there, unless expressions were connected with contexts other than those in which we are using them now.”¹⁸⁵ In light of this point, Rhees says that when a child comes to differentiate between sensible discourse and a jumble of words, this

is not something you can teach him by any sort of drill, as you might perhaps teach him the names of objects. I think he gets it chiefly from the way in which the members of his family speak to him and answer him. In this way he gets an idea of how remarks are to be connected, and of how what people say to one another makes sense. In any case, it is not like learning the meaning of this or that expression. And although he can go on speaking, this is not like going on with the use of any particular expression or set of expressions, although of course it includes that.¹⁸⁶

Phillips suggests that what Rhees says of the builders can also be said of religious worshippers. Rhees argues that when we imagine the builders cut off from everything apart from the technique of the job, the builders seem merely to be playing a game of building with blocks, a system of responses to signs, rather than actually building a house. Similarly, imagining religious worshippers as cut off from everything apart from the formalities of worship, makes their activity seem not to be worship, but rather some type of esoteric game.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸⁵ Phillips, 68.

¹⁸⁶ Rhees, 82.

Phillips asks, “What is the difference between a rehearsal for an act of worship and the actual act of worship?”¹⁸⁷ It cannot be a matter of responses to signs, because a correct response to signs may be given in a rehearsal. Rather, the difference lies in the point the activity of worship has in the lives of the worshippers. This entails the bearing it has on other features of their lives. “Religion has something to say about aspects of human existence which are quite intelligible without reference to religion: birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune and misfortune.”¹⁸⁸ Moreover, the connection between these other aspects of human existence and religion is not contingent. Many religious beliefs could not be what they are without these other aspects. Phillips points, for example, to Jesus’ words, ‘Not as the world giveth give I unto you.’ The force of this contrast depends logically on both parts of the contrast. Thus, the force of religious belief is in part dependent on what is outside of religion.

Phillips has argued that religious reactions to various situations cannot be assessed by external criteria of adequacy. However, religious reactions to such situations must also not be fantastic. Whether these reactions are fantastic or not is decided by criteria which is not in dispute.

For example, some religious believers may try to explain away the reality of suffering, or try to say that all suffering has some purpose. When they speak like this, one may accuse them of not taking suffering seriously. Or if religious believers talk of death as if it were a sleep of long duration, one may accuse them of not taking death seriously. In these examples, what is said about suffering and death can be judged in terms of what we already know and believe about these matters.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Phillips, 69.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

Thus, religious reactions are fantastic when they distort what we already know about matters. If a religious reaction does commit this sort of distortion, no appeal to saying it in the name of religion can justify or excuse the distortion.

What we have seen is that the meaning and force of religious belief depends in part on the relation of these beliefs to other features of human existence. Without this dependence religion could not have the importance it does in the lives of believers. Objections to treating religious beliefs as distinctive language-games arise from awareness of this importance. However, there is confusion in these objections. This confusion is the result of drawing false conclusions from important truths. While these critics recognize, rightly, that religious belief is partly dependent on features outside of religion, they conclude, wrongly, that one would contradict himself if he claimed both to recognize this dependence and to recognize that religious beliefs are distinctive language-games. “They are led to this conclusion *only because they assume that the relation between religious beliefs and the non-religious facts is that between what is justified and its justification, or that between a conclusion and its grounds.*”¹⁹⁰ When it is said that religious beliefs are partly dependent upon non-religious facts, this is not to say that religious beliefs are justified by or inferred from those facts.

II. Addis

Now that we have looked at Phillips’ defense of applying Wittgenstein’s conception of a language-game to the issue of religious belief, let us turn to a criticism of

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 72.

this approach advanced by Mark Addis¹⁹¹. Addis claims there is a difficulty in the relationship between Phillips' treatment of religious belief as a distinct language-game and Wittgenstein's own conception of the distinctiveness of language-games. "It is important to observe that Wittgenstein did not make any remarks about the uses to which Phillips put the idea of distinct religious language-games and that therefore this usage lacks exegetical support."¹⁹² Addis points out that Phillips emphasizes the limits of the analogy between games and language. This emphasis points to the fact that there are different language-games played within the same language. The question that arises is what methods are available for distinguishing a distinct language-game. "Arguably," holds Addis, "there is no (good) exegetical evidence in Wittgenstein about what principles or methods should be used to assist in the identification of distinct religious language-games."¹⁹³

Addis claims that the most promising justification for Phillips' treatment of religious beliefs as distinct language-games is found in the *Brown Book*, where there are analogues to distinct language-games. However, Phillips points out that while Wittgenstein stressed the distinctiveness of language-games, he also spoke of the links between them. According to Phillips, Wittgenstein was aware of the bearings that various utterances have upon each other. But in the *Brown Book*, Addis claims,

¹⁹¹ Mark Addis, "D. Z. Phillips' Fideism in Wittgenstein's Mirror," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis. London: Routledge, 2001. 83-100.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

Wittgenstein does not treat the relationship between language and games in the way Phillips construes it.

That is to say, concern is not with how utterances made in autonomous and isolated language-games affect each other....[Rather, Wittgenstein] was interested in how actually existing and potential but non-existing language-games might interact.¹⁹⁴

Thus, even in the *Brown Book*, we do not find exegetical support for Phillips' treatment of language-games.

Addis also points out that there is not a single uniform way in which the notion of a language-game is treated throughout Wittgenstein's writings. For example, during the middle-period, in which the *Brown Book* was written, Wittgenstein experimented with the idea that language-games were miniature models of language, and the extent to which they could provide an account of what language is. In the later period, in which the *Philosophical Investigations* was written, hypothetical language-games were thought to illuminate our language by displaying similarities and differences with it. "An important consequence of these differences is that if Wittgenstein's changing perspective on language-games is to be taken seriously then language-games cannot be treated by just one account, as Phillips attempts to do."¹⁹⁵

Phillips discusses the notion of the completeness of language-games, claiming that Wittgenstein emphasized this in order to remove the assumption that there is a general propositional form. But in his later writings, claims Addis, Wittgenstein thought that focusing on the completeness of language-games would obscure the way in which they should be used to understand language. The goal of the philosopher, in these later

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 93.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 94

writings, is held to be the resolution of philosophical problems, not completeness or exactness.

In considering Addis's objection, we should remember that language-games are not something which Wittgenstein discovered, and that have the peculiar feature of being inexplicable. Rather, the concept of a language-game is intended as a methodological tool of analysis, one which helps to resolve philosophical problems. As Addis indicates at the end of his criticism, the issue is not about the completeness or exactness of the account of religious belief yielded by the application of language-games to this issue, but rather, whether the application of this concept helps to shed light on, and give philosophical understanding to, the issue of religious belief.

Let us begin by taking up Addis's contention that the concept of a language-game does not have one uniform usage throughout Wittgenstein's writings. Hans-Johann Glock¹⁹⁶ tells us that Wittgenstein used the term language-game from 1932 onward. Initially, the point of this concept was to draw attention to the similarities between language and games, namely, that language is a rule-guided activity. The notion of a language-game replaced an earlier idea Wittgenstein had for a calculus model of language. According to the calculus model, language was governed by a set of rules which constituted a 'rigid, precise, and definite order hidden behind the motley appearance of language.' "By turning to language-games, Wittgenstein switched

¹⁹⁶ Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 193.

attention from the geometry of a symbolism (whether language or calculus) to its place in human practice.”¹⁹⁷

There are four different ways in which Wittgenstein employs the term ‘language-game.’ The first usage, found in the *Blue and Brown Books*, involves teaching practices. “Language-games are explained as ‘ways of using signs’ which are simpler than those of everyday language, ‘primitive forms of language,’ with which ‘a child begins to make use of words.’”¹⁹⁸ This usage evolves into a conception of language-games as systems of communication by which children learn and are taught their native language. These practices are important to Wittgenstein because they show features of our language which continue to play a role as standards of correctness. However, this usage recedes in favor of a fictional conception of language-games.

The fictional conception of language-games involves the notion of “hypothetical or invented linguistic practices of a simple or primitive kind.”¹⁹⁹ This usage of ‘language-game’ refers to hypothetical language-games of a very primitive nature, which we invent for purposes of comparison with our actual use of language. Through this process of comparison we will shed light on the features of our actual linguistic usage. This fictional conception of language-games dominates the usage of this concept in the *Brown Book*, but has receded by the time the *Investigations* is written.

While Wittgenstein continued to believe that the construction of fictional language-games was important for understanding our actual linguistic concepts, in the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 194.

Investigations and other later writings, the usage of ‘language-game’ “focuses more on actual linguistic activities, and describes them against the background of our non-linguistic practices.”²⁰⁰ In the *Investigations*, for example, we find a list of speech acts, including giving orders, asking, swearing, and constructing an object from a description, among other things. In connection with this third usage of ‘language-game,’ Wittgenstein also speaks of the language-game with a particular word, such as ‘game’, ‘thought’, ‘read’, or ‘pain’. This involves discussing how these concepts are used in the context of our non-linguistic practices.

The fourth and final usage of this concept involves reference to the overall system of our language. Wittgenstein speaks of ‘the whole language-game’, ‘the human language-game’, and ‘our language-game’. “Indeed, it is through this use of the term that he makes his most important point: ‘I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game.’”²⁰¹ This is the usage which comes to more and more dominate the use of this term in the progression of Wittgenstein’s writings. “Whereas at first words have meaning within a proposition, and the game they are used in, he later said that ‘words have meaning only in the stream of life.’”²⁰² The idea is that concepts have their meaning within the whole framework of a language, its rules, and the non-linguistic behaviors which accompany it.

Perhaps we should attempt to identify which usage Phillips has in mind when he employs the term language-game. The first two usages seem to be immediately ruled out.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 196.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 197.

²⁰² Ibid., 197.

Phillips' discussion is not about practices used to teach the language of religious belief, nor is it about invention of fictional language-games to compare with the actual use of religious language. While there is some discussion of how we use the word 'God', we would not say that Phillips' discussion is simply about the language-game with the word 'God.' However, neither is Phillips discussing our whole language. His focus is on religious language. It seems then that Phillips' employment of the term language-game falls somewhere between the third and fourth usage. Phillips is concerned with the way in which the whole of *religious* language is woven into human actions.

Therefore, Addis is correct in claiming that Phillips' use of the term is not supported by the conception of language-games found in the *Brown Book*. The *Brown Book* entails the first, and primarily the second, usage of the term. Addis goes on to contend that Phillips cannot utilize one account of language-games because of Wittgenstein's changing conception of the term. However, if Phillips utilizes something more akin to Wittgenstein's mature and dominant notion of this concept, there appears to be no problem with this approach. Again, I would argue, the question is whether Phillips' application of this concept helps to shed light on a philosophical understanding of religious belief. In so far as there are distinct uses of the word 'belief' and 'exist' within the sphere of religious activity, then it may be helpful to describe religious beliefs as aspects of distinctive language-games. The significance of doing so is to show that these words are used in a peculiar way within this sphere of discourse, differently from how they are used in other realms of discourse.

Addis's final criticism is that Phillips' employs the idea of distinct language-games in manner which Wittgenstein never endorsed. According to Addis, this is because Wittgenstein never developed a methodology for identifying distinct language-games. Addis's seems to feel that we need to have a hard and fast method for identifying distinct language-games, and in so far as we do not, Phillips' contention that religious beliefs are distinctive language-games is unacceptable. Glock remarks, regarding the criticism that there is no criteria for identifying distinct language-games, "There is no fundamental difficulty here. Wittgenstein distinguishes linguistic activities at different levels of generality. What counts as the same activity (e.g., whether one needs to determine telling a story from telling a joke) depends on the level concerned, and on all levels there will be borderline cases."²⁰³ Language-games involve the notion of an activity. When locating a distinct language-game, we need to look for a difference in activity, that is, a difference in linguistic usage and the way it is woven into out non-linguistic behavior. But actual linguistic practices are not neatly and uniformly partitioned, nor is there a single methodology by which we could identify the contours of these practices.

We seem to have come back to the same question, namely, is Phillips' account of religious beliefs as distinctive language-games appropriate for this level or type of activity? Addis's merely argues that Phillips' usage is not exegetically supported by Wittgenstein's writings. However, he offers no comment on whether religious belief itself is appropriately treated as a distinctive language-game. The criticism that there is

²⁰³ Ibid., 196.

no exegetical support for Phillips' argument does not stand up when we consider that he is employing Wittgenstein's concept of a language-game in something like its more mature usages. Beyond this, we must consider the actual activity of religious belief and whether it is appropriately treated as a distinct language-game. Phillips, largely following Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Religious Belief,' shows that there are reasons to treat religious belief differently from other spheres of human existence.

III. Moore

Gareth Moore²⁰⁴ does not disagree with Phillips' application of language-games to the issue of religious belief. It is true, he holds, that religious belief is a distinctive rule-guided linguistic activity, one in which discourse has its own peculiar manner of functioning. Moore's criticism of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion comes from an entirely different direction. Moore points to Phillips' use of the distinction between absolute judgments of value and relative judgments of value in Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics.' Phillips criticizes those critics who want to make religious belief seem important by accusing them of thinking only in worldly terms. These critics argue for the importance of religious belief by making belief in God relatively better than not doing so. God is more powerful than the world or the Devil, and therefore we should believe in God. However, God just happens to be more powerful. If things were otherwise, then there would be no necessity about belief in God. Thus, it is only relatively true that we

²⁰⁴ Gareth Moore, "Wittgenstein's English Parson: Some Reflections on the Reception of Wittgenstein in the Philosophy of Religion," in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy* ed. D. Z. Phillips and Mario Von der Ruhr. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005. 209-228.

ought to believe in God. Phillips suggests that people who believe in God for this reason ‘have a policy, not a faith.’ Moore tends to agree with Phillips on this point, but feels that a number of questions are raised:

There is a great deal in what Phillips says with which I sympathize, but if I am sympathetic to Phillips here, is this because I think he expresses a fine philosophical insight, or because my religious sensibilities are similar to his? Is the person against whom Phillips is arguing making a philosophical mistake or is he rather expressing a religious viewpoint of which Phillips disapproves?²⁰⁵

In answering these questions, Moore asks us to imagine the following conversation between person A and person B.

Suppose A says to B: ‘You really ought to try to behave better,’ that B counters: ‘And what if I don’t?’ and that A replies: ‘Because you will be judged by God in the end, and he will determine your fate. If you mend your ways, God will welcome you into heaven, but if you don’t, you will burn in hell fire.’²⁰⁶

As we consider what has transpired in this exchange, Moore suggests that it will not occur to us that person A is engaging in philosophy. Rather, this is a religious or theological argument about someone’s eternal destiny. While philosophical mistakes do occur in areas other than philosophy itself, the fact that this argument is over someone’s eternal destiny should make us hesitate about expressing our disagreement by ascribing a philosophical mistake to person A. It would be more natural to claim that person A is making a religious or theological mistake. Perhaps, suggests Moore, ‘mistake’ is not even the correct term in this context.

We might say rather that we find repugnant the view of God that A is expressing; we might say that it gives a truer picture of God to say, not that he threatens B with eternal punishment but that he loves him, and that this is why B should change his ways. A, we might say, does not understand God if he can talk about him in that way; but if we do say that, we charge A with

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 220.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 220.

theological error, not with a philosophical mistake; it is God that we claim he misunderstands, not the *concept* of God.²⁰⁷

If we follow Phillips in claiming that person A has made a philosophical mistake, we would be committed to the claim that person A is not engaged in genuine religious discourse. Person A has a policy, rather than belief in God. However, this would be an odd claim, as person A says just the sort of thing we might expect a religious person to say. The implication would be that person A holds values that are incompatible with *true* religion (or *true* Christianity). If it is claimed that person A has a wrong conception of God, then the implication would be that person A is not religious in a perfectly obvious sense. Thus, concludes Moore, “Phillips’ argument is not a contribution to a philosophical understanding of what religious belief is; it is rather the expression of one particular religious belief, or of one particular theological or spiritual viewpoint within the Christian tradition, and a rejection of an opposing viewpoint.”²⁰⁸

The real significance of this discussion, contends Moore, is not to criticize Phillips so much as to raise the question about Wittgenstein’s own contribution to the philosophy of religion. “It seems to me that very many of the remarks of Wittgenstein which are held to contribute to the philosophy of religion have in reality little to do with the philosophy of religion; they are rather expressions of a particular religious sensibility, or expressions of a religious point of view.”²⁰⁹ If Wittgenstein makes any contribution to philosophy of religion, it is not through clarification of what counts as religious discourse as opposed to non-religious discourse, but by expressing a position of what counts as true

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 220.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 222.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 222-223.

or deep religion. However, what is true or deep religion is not established by philosophical means, but is a matter of sensibility.

Wittgenstein accuses those who do not share his sensibilities of being dull or stupid, of not understanding religion. But he does *not* accuse these people of not being religious. “What I want to suggest here is that for Wittgenstein there is no such thing as a religious understanding of life and the universe. There is rather a range of religious ways of understanding.”²¹⁰ A person may have a deep understanding of faith or a very shallow one. But even the shallow religious believer is nonetheless a religious believer. Thus, Wittgenstein’s remarks about religion are a set of theological or spiritual remarks. They depict a certain sensibility about what is deep or profound in religious belief. They are not philosophical remarks and do not make a contribution to the philosophy of religion.

In considering Moore’s criticism, it will be important to distinguish between his objection to Phillips, and the subsequent conclusion he reaches about Wittgenstein’s own remarks on religion. While Phillips may be advancing a certain spiritual sensibility in his use of the distinction between relative judgments of value and absolute judgments of value, we should not be so quick to conclude that Wittgenstein’s remarks on religion are also therefore depict a certain spiritual sensibility.

One of Wittgenstein’s fundamental insights about religion is that it functions like a picture in the life of a believer. This picture is one that the believer appeals to in the conduct and course of his or her life. Perhaps one way of addressing Moore’s criticism is

²¹⁰ Ibid., 224.

to ask whether this notion of religious belief functioning as a picture belies a commitment on Wittgenstein's part to a specific theological or spiritual sensibility.

Let us consider, in this context, the distinction which William James makes between 'sick-soul' and healthy-minded' religion in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.²¹¹ 'Sick-soul' religion is constituted by religious belief that focuses on the notion that something is deeply wrong, sinful, or corrupt with the person. 'Healthy-minded' religion, by contrast, is constituted by a sort of positive-minded spirituality or religious emotion. We might say the believer who functions with a picture of God judging and admonishing before his mind—a sort of 'fire and brimstone' religion—practices a 'sick-soul' variety of religion. The believer who acts with the life of Jesus before her mind, as a sort of positive role-model, practices a 'healthy-minded' variety of religion. Wittgenstein's insight is that in either case religion functions as a sort of picture to which the believer appeals. This point is independent of the particular spiritual sensibility held by the believer in question. Therefore, I would argue, Wittgenstein is not endorsing one or the other spiritual sensibilities just described. Rather, Wittgenstein's insight that religious belief functions as a picture to which the believer appeals, is indeed a contribution to a philosophical understanding of religion.

Moore's criticism began by taking aim at Phillips' contention that someone who believes in God for instrumental reasons (i.e. a relative sense of value) has 'a policy, rather than a faith.' According to Moore, in so far as Phillips criticizes those who have an instrumental religious belief, he is endorsing a specific theological or spiritual

²¹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

sensibility. Even Jesus himself appears to endorse the sort of instrumentalist sense of self-preservation which Phillips calls a ‘policy’ in the following passage:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.²¹²

Is Phillips then opposing the very founder of Christianity? It seems that Phillips is endorsing a certain spiritual sensibility in this argument. He is making a claim about the sort of spiritual attitude or sensibility that one must possess in order to have ‘true’ religious belief. However, it would be a mistake to draw from this, as Moore does, the conclusion that Wittgenstein’s own remarks on religious belief express a certain spiritual sensibility. Phillips’ argument arose from his own attempt to show that religious beliefs ought to be treated as distinctive language-games, and was not something derived from Wittgenstein’s remarks on religion. We find that whereas attention to the actual usages of religious discourse do not show us that Phillips’ description is correct, the same cannot be said of Wittgenstein’s remarks about the grammar of this discourse.

So much for the notion that Wittgenstein is expressing a certain spiritual sensibility in his remarks on religion, but what of Moore’s contention that he is also expressing certain theological assumptions? After all, a distinction can be made between a believer’s spiritual sensibility, and the theological position to which he or she ascribes. One might claim that Wittgenstein has a very Kierkegaardian conception of religion, and therefore, does indeed endorse a certain theology. It may be further pointed out that many Christians endorse some other theology, such as that of St. Thomas Aquinas, for

²¹² Ibid., 221. Mark 9:43-44.

example. In this case, Wittgenstein's remarks are not a contribution to the philosophy of religion, but the endorsement of one theology over another.

Wittgenstein's intention is not to endorse any theology. Rather, he looks to the actual use of religious discourse, and in keeping with his method of philosophy, gives us insight into how this discourse functions in the lives of religious believers. While Aquinas may have developed an intricate metaphysical system to justify Christianity, and some believers may be appealed to by this system, we need to look at the role this metaphysical system plays in religious belief. Is the metaphysical system what brought them to religious belief, or is it an attempt, after the fact, to intellectually justify or further explain their belief? Wittgenstein, observing the actual practice of religious belief, says,

...All sound doctrines are of no avail. One must change one's *life*. (Or the *direction* of one's life). That all wisdom is cold; and that one can no more use it to bring one's life into order than one can forge *cold* iron.

A sound doctrine does not have to *catch hold* of one; one can follow it like a doctor's prescription.—But here something must grasp one and turn one around.—(This is how I understand it.) Once turned around, one must *stay* turned around. Wisdom is passionless.”²¹³

A doctrine, such as a metaphysical system, does not grab hold of someone in the way that religious faith is adhered to by religious believers. Wittgenstein describes what we find when we observe the nature of religious belief in the following remark, “It strikes me that a religious belief can only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference.”²¹⁴ Here is an account of the role religious belief plays in the life of the believer.

²¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*. 53.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

But Wittgenstein is not alone in his observation that metaphysical doctrines play, at best, a secondary role in believers' religious faith. William James had remarked, "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translation of a text into another tongue."²¹⁵ Metaphysical doctrines are a 'translation' of religious belief into an intellectualized account of these beliefs; they are not the source of them. James goes on to explain that these metaphysical doctrines could only have arisen after religious belief was already assented to.

When I call theological formulas secondary products, I mean that in a world in which no religious feeling had ever existed, I doubt whether any philosophic theology could ever have been framed. I doubt if dispassionate intellectual contemplation of the universe, apart from inner unhappiness and need of deliverance on the one hand and mystical emotion on the other, would ever have resulted in religious philosophies such as we now possess.²¹⁶

Like Wittgenstein, James finds that theological or metaphysical doctrines would not be enough to grasp the believer in the way that religious faith does. The difference between James and Wittgenstein lies in the fact that whereas the former came to this conclusion by observing the psychological experiences of religious believers, the latter arrived at this conclusion by focusing attention on the functioning of religious discourse.

Recall, that for Wittgenstein, philosophy does not interfere in the world, but merely describes the usage and functioning of language. It is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. As Phillips points out, the important issue here is to describe what recognition of belief amounts to in the context of religious belief. This is shown by displaying the 'grammar of religious discourse,' in other words, the rules which govern

²¹⁵ James, 337.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 338.

the use of religious discourse. In so far as Wittgenstein describes the grammar or rules that govern the use of religious language, he is approaching the subject from a philosophic standpoint, as opposed to endorsing any particular theology or spiritual sensibility. Wittgenstein's own attitude toward religious language-games seems to be a naturalistic one. If Wittgenstein's philosophical assessment of religious discourse yields a picture more Kierkegaardian in nature, this in no way shows that Wittgenstein's insights are theological rather than philosophical.

But even if this descriptive account shows that theological doctrine plays a secondary role in religious belief, a sort of intellectualizing of this belief, it might be claimed that it does inform religious belief nonetheless. What then are we to make of theological doctrine on a Wittgensteinian account of religious belief? This is a very large topic and much could be said. However, I will merely give a brief summary here of the sort of approach to theology that Wittgenstein would likely endorse. While some philosophers and theologians have viewed theology as a set of truth-claims about a transcendent reality, a Wittgensteinian approach sees theology as a set of descriptive claims about the religious experiences of a community of believers. Theological doctrine, on this account, is not making universal or eternal truth-claims, rather it is expressing the historically and culturally bound religious practices of a specific religious community. Theological doctrine is also providing the 'grammar' or rules for the use of religious language. For example, let us take the theological doctrine that God is omnipresent. This doctrine is describing a religious experience such as, 'when everything in my life seems to be going wrong, I feel that even then God is with me.' But not only is

this doctrinal statement describing the religious experience of a particular religious community, it is also providing a grammatical rule for how the concept of God is to be used. It tells us that when we speak about God, we are to speak of Him as being omnipresent.

In this thesis, I have located the place of religion in the earlier thought of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The *Tractatus* conceived of religious truths as being ineffable and falling outside of the realm of meaningful language. Wittgenstein would go on to reject this 'scientific' philosophy and to develop a more human-centered view of language in his *Philosophical Investigations* and other later writings.

Next I examined the competing interpretations of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as applied to religion offered by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch. I found that Winch had the more plausible interpretation, pointing out that Wittgenstein was not opposed to scientific explanation, but merely to the idea that science explains everything. Further, I argued, Winch offers a much more successful approach to interpreting Wittgenstein's religious attitude than Malcolm. We should not look for analogies that hold between Wittgenstein's philosophy and a religious point of view, but instead recognize that Wittgenstein thought a 'religious' attitude must be brought to the practice of philosophy. I also examined Kai Nielsen's classic critique of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. In response to Nielsen, I argued that he is mistaken in his approach to the nature of religious belief. Nielsen attempts to provide a verificationist argument against religion, contending that religious propositions claim to be factual, while failing to meet the

conditions of verifiability. However, Nielsen fails to see that the difference between the believer and non-believer is a matter of perspective, the use or non-use of a picture, as opposed to a differing set of factual assertions.

Finally, I examined arguments from D. Z. Phillips, which attempt to justify the treatment of religious beliefs as distinctive language-games. Mark Addis criticizes Phillips' treatment of language-games, holding that it lacked exegetical support and that there is no method for determining distinctive language-games. Further, argued Addis, due to Wittgenstein's evolving usage of this term, Phillips' uniform treatment of the concept could not be justified. I argued that there is no need of a method for identifying distinctive language-games. What we are looking for are different activities and a difference in usage or rules of grammar. Phillips, following Wittgenstein, points to distinctive usages of religious language, which justify treating religious belief as a distinctive language-game. Gareth Moore offered an alternative criticism of Phillips and Wittgenstein, holding that these philosophers offered insight from a certain spiritual theological perspective, rather than a contribution to the philosophy of religion. I attempted to show that while Phillips' argument may be susceptible to this criticism, Wittgenstein's own remarks are not made on behalf of a certain spiritual perspective, but instead make a contribution to the general philosophical understanding of religion.