

# Introduction: On Reading Wittgenstein on Religion

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There are many different readings of Wittgenstein's philosophy. It is not surprising, therefore, that these should affect how his legacy, with respect to religion, is understood. There is no agreed overall view of that legacy.

The issue of how Wittgenstein is to be read faces us from his earliest work onwards. For example, what is he trying to say about ethics and religion in the *Tractatus*? That question is the concern of the first symposium in this collection. Two popular answers have been advanced which take us in radically different directions. According to the first answer, Wittgenstein is seeking to show us the limits of what can be said. The propositions of logic and mathematics are purely formal. They tell us nothing about the world. Only empirical propositions do so. Ethics and religion, on the other hand, fall outside the limit of what can be said. If we try to express them in terms of propositions, as understood in the *Tractatus*, the result is nonsense. Someone may want to say that ethics and religion express emotive attitudes to the facts, but, in themselves, they have no cognitive content. In this sharp separation of facts and values, Wittgenstein's views are seen as leading, quite naturally, to the sterner views regarding religion found in logical positivism.

The second view of what Wittgenstein is saying about ethics and religion in the *Tractatus* is very different. It agrees that they are placed beyond the limits of what can be said, and that they are said to be nonsense. This nonsense, however, is said to be nonsense of a special kind: deep nonsense. It indicates Wittgenstein's recognition of a mystical, ineffable realm of value, for which our words are, of necessity, inadequate. It is in this context that ethics and religion go beyond 'what can be said'.

The contributors to the first symposium reject these popular readings of the place of ethics and religion in the *Tractatus*. They advance what has become known in the literature as an austere or resolute reading of what is meant by 'nonsense' in that work. Wittgenstein means what he says: nonsense is nonsense. There is no room granted to something called 'deep nonsense'. When Wittgenstein denies that ethics is expressible in propositional form, he is denying that the ethical enters our lives in this way. Where, then, is 'the ethical'? The answer is that it runs throughout the work. It is present in the integrity with which Wittgenstein wrestles with his questions. Ethics has no special domain. In *Tractatus* terms, any sign can be an ethical sign.

If we embrace the above conclusions, what are we to make of the fact that a

specific section of the *Tractatus* is reserved for a discussion of 'the ethical'? As an answer, we are told that in that section Wittgenstein is deliberately aping the ways in which ethical theses are discussed in moral philosophy. He is not advocating or participating in such discussions, but displaying their nonsensicality.

This austere view of 'nonsense' in the *Tractatus* has attracted many, but disturbed others. Among the latter are those who feel that the picture of Wittgenstein as an author fully in control of a strategy by which he brings his readers to a realization of nonsense, is one which is too neat, too well-rounded and self-sufficient. It does not do justice to the spirit in which Wittgenstein philosophized, or to the character of the man. It leaves out the *struggle* in his work. Wasn't Wittgenstein genuinely puzzled about ethics and religion in the *Tractatus*? Wasn't he in the grip of difficulties which came to be resolved only in the developments in his later work? In reply to these questions, it is said that in his later work Wittgenstein does not change his mind about the nonsense present in the ways ethics and religion are often discussed. What is new in the later work is his exploration of *the sources* of the nonsense revealed in the *Tractatus*; sources which are seen to be more numerous than he had thought.

Yet, doubts may remain about this austere view of 'nonsense' with respect to ethics and religion. Suppose we grant that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is recognizing certain nonsensical ways of discussing ethics and religion. Is it not true that, in his later work, the notion of 'what can be said' itself undergoes a radical development, one which leads to the inclusion, not the exclusion, of ethics and religion from 'what can be said'? This development has to do with fundamental changes in Wittgenstein's view of logic. By the time of his last work in *On Certainty*, he is asking whether logic can be described, or whether it is something that shows itself in *practice*. His emphasis is not on drawing a limit to show what *can* be said, but on what *is* said.

Still, it may be said that the ethical runs through all our practices. Any practice may occasion the ethical. But what of religion? It seems to have dropped out of the picture. The symposiasts admit that one cannot say that religion runs through the whole of life as they claim the ethical does, but someone may ask why not. Is this an empirical or conceptual claim? Is the point that whereas human life without religion is imaginable, human life without the ethical is not? As far as Wittgenstein's early texts are concerned, one can see differences in the attention given to religion in the *Notebooks*, from the remarks on the ethical in the *Tractatus*. The former really are no more than what they are called – notebooks – whereas the *Tractatus* has a carefully worked out structure and purpose. In the latter work, we are meant to see the ethical in the character of the enquiry. Even so, how can it be denied that the way in which Wittgenstein talks of the ethical has clear religious resonances, resonances that become more explicit in his 'Lecture on Ethics'? When he speaks of the experience of feeling 'absolutely safe' in his Lecture, that is not an experience which belongs to *any* kind of ethic. Is there not a development in Wittgenstein's later views of ethics? Would he continue to speak in general terms of 'the ethical'? If not, would it be natural, in the case of any ethic, to speak of it running through the whole of life?

Wittgenstein's views on religion occupy centre stage in the second symposium, since it discusses his *Lectures on Religious Belief*. There is an important link with

the first symposium, however, in that it is suggested that the view of language in the *Tractatus* has led to a popular, but confused reading of the *Lectures*.

In the *Tractatus*, we find the view that speakers of a language share a common logical space. To contradict 'p' with 'not-p' is to disagree with what has been asserted within that space. If we share this common logical space, it follows that, in principle, every thought is available to every speaker of the language. A major feature of Wittgenstein's later work, however, is its abandonment of the notion of a common logical space. The analogy between games and language is meant to illustrate the variety of our forms of discourse. 'Saying something' does not always amount to the same thing. How do these developments affect people's reading of Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief*?

An answer to the above question, popular with those who do not read Wittgenstein, but also with many who do, is the view that Wittgenstein held that those who play religious language games cannot be contradicted by those who do not. The non-believer cannot contradict the believer. On this view, it seems that Wittgenstein has replaced one theory by another. In the *Tractatus*, it is said that all speakers share a common logical space. In the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, it is said, Wittgenstein has replaced the one common logical space with a conception of a number of conceptual spaces, each of which is autonomous. Anyone occupying one of these conceptual spaces cannot contradict what is said in another.

According to the symposiasts, this popular view does not do justice to Wittgenstein's conception of language games. Language games interweave in our lives in far more complex ways. It is ironic to attribute a new general theory about conceptual spaces to Wittgenstein, when his whole purpose, after the *Tractatus*, is to move away from theoretical generalizations about language, and get us to pay attention to the actual uses of language. When we look at actual usage, we find that the fact that ethical and religious disputants do not occupy the same logical space does not deter them from contradicting each other, or from calling the view they oppose 'wrong'. Wittgenstein is moving away from a logic which stipulates what can and cannot be said, the hardness of the logical 'must', and asking us to pay attention to what *is* said.

When philosophers denied that the non-believer contradicts the believer, when the latter says, 'There is a God', and the former says, 'There is no God', it was partly as a reaction to, and protest against, evidentialism in the philosophy of religion. Evidentialism is the view that the question whether there is a God can be settled by an appeal to agreed evidence within a common logical space. The symposiasts seem to agree that such a space does not exist as between religious belief and atheism. If, then, despite this fact, someone wants to say that the atheist *contradicts* the believer, whatever is meant by 'contradiction' cannot be that meaning which depends on the presence of a common logical space. It would therefore be misleading to say that despite the absence of such a space, the atheist is able, *after all*, to contradict the believer, since that would suggest a grammatical continuity between cases which are importantly different.

In the symposium, it is insisted that the atheist can be said to *naysay* the believer. But what does that amount to? If one contradicts a person, one disagrees with what he has said, but all forms of disagreement or gainsaying are not contradictions. Certainly, those philosophers who denied that the atheist contradicts the believer

did not want to deny the conflict between them. On the contrary, they held that the conflict and disagreement are too deep to be called a contradiction. They wanted to distinguish between 'p' being contradicted by 'not-p' *within* a certain way of thinking, and the rejection of that whole way of thinking. How is such a rejection to be characterized?

However that question is to be answered, there seems to be agreement on the direction in which we should look. The matter is not going to be settled by a theory which tells us when we can and cannot speak of contradiction. The task is that of doing conceptual justice to actual cases, and to the language which gives the best expression to what is going on in them. It may be that even when some cases are located, some will be happy to speak of contradiction in connection with them, while others will not. Think of disputes over whether illness is a punishment from God. Reflection on that question can take many different forms, from disputes about supernatural causality, to the way Job turns his back on the way his comforters urge him to think.

Similar issues arise in the third symposium which reflects on Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*'. Here, too, one finds a popular reading according to which Wittgenstein substitutes his own theory for another. Rejecting Frazer's theory, in which primitive rituals are treated as primitive science, Wittgenstein is said to advance an expressive theory of rituals in which he asserts that rituals have an expressive rather than an instrumental significance. By simply substituting one theory for another, it has been argued that Wittgenstein missed an important third possibility, namely, that the primitive rituals are not the product of mistaken hypotheses, but of conceptual confusions.

This popular view is difficult to sustain, since at the time he wrote his 'Remarks', Wittgenstein thought that probably most rituals harboured conceptual confusions. Recognition of this fact should not lead to an apologetic defence of religion adopted by some readers of Wittgenstein, namely, avoiding the recognition of superstition in religion, simply by refusing to call any instance of superstition religious. It is important to recognize the various ways in which religion can make a distinctive contribution to superstition. Wittgenstein thought that great harm has been caused in this way. There is nothing in his views which involves denying that, at any given time, what goes on in the name of religion may be pervasively superstitious.

It may be thought that a central feature of Wittgenstein's philosophical method makes it difficult to come to the above conclusion. Wittgenstein thought it extremely important to distinguish between a magical and a logical view of signs. According to the magical view, the meaning of a sign is given, 'all at once', as it were, by the sign itself. On the logical view of signs, the sign gets its sense from the place it occupies, or the role it plays, in the practice to which it belongs. The fundamental appeal is to practice, not to the sign. It has been thought, however, that this appeal to practice is problematic. It seems to lead to an unfortunate and untenable conclusion. In Wittgenstein's use of the term 'language game', it cannot be said that a language game is confused. If, however, practices are clusters of language games, it seems to follow that no practice can ever be said to be confused! The only confusion, it is said, is in the misleading gloss one may give of the practice. The practice itself cannot be confused. Since it is evident to everyone, however, that confusions may be present, not only in the glosses we give of our

practices, but in our practices themselves, there must be something fundamentally wrong in the reliance placed on an appeal to practice in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

In the discussion of this difficulty, raised in the symposium, it was pointed out that it arises due to a fundamental misunderstanding of what an appeal to practice in Wittgenstein's work amounts to. It is essential to distinguish between a grammatical and a sociological use of 'practice'. In its grammatical use, the appeal to practice is an appeal to the conceptual character of what is said or done. In this context, we are either appealing to practice, or to nothing at all. On the sociological use of 'practice', however, we are simply referring to what happens, to what, in fact, goes on. Such activities may be riddled with confusions. It is only by conflating the grammatical and sociological use of 'practice' that we arrive at the conclusion that, according to Wittgenstein, there are no confused practices.

It is tempting to argue that confused religious practices are parasitic on the grammatical forms of religious practices. The former are simply confused distortions of the latter. This is far too easy and sanguine an assumption. It underestimates the kind of religion, the needs of which depend on embracing confusions. Think of the attraction of salvation 'all at once'; the desire to possess eternity immediately. Wittgenstein emphasizes that a magical view of signs may lead to superstition as well as to metaphysics. Just say the word, and the spirit, or the meaning, is given immediately. In neither case is the result a *mistake*. We are in the realm of confusion.

For all the above reasons, it may be thought to be important to distinguish between those religions which have, within their own teaching, a distinction between what is genuine and what is distorted, and religions where it seems that confusion reigns in their central tenets. On the other hand, one would have to be careful, in the latter case, that one's impression of confusion did not emanate from a failure to appreciate the grammar of the religious practices in question. Even allowing for this possibility, however, many have accused Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion of being selective in what they are prepared to call 'religion'. For example, are they not in danger, as Wittgenstein was, of underestimating the importance of historical facts, even in the religious examples they favour? Wittgenstein went as far as to say that the truth of Christianity would not be affected even if all the historical facts associated with it were shown to be false. It has been argued that while such facts are not sufficient conditions for the truth of Christianity, they are certainly necessary conditions for its truth. In ignoring such matters, it is said that Wittgenstein, and those influenced by him, are being prescriptive rather than descriptive. I wonder to what extent there is disagreement here. Would anyone deny that there is an enormous difference between Christ's Passion as something that happened, and a story of a Passion? The problem is with the sense of 'something that happened'. For example, the crucifixion is certainly the historical occasion for faith, but is it the historical object of faith; that is, can what Christians believe happened on the Cross be assessed by normal historical criteria?

The worry as to whether Wittgensteinian philosophers stick, as they claim to do, to their descriptive task, surfaces in the fourth symposium, which discusses the philosophical reception of Wittgenstein's influence in the philosophy of religion. It is important to remember that by 'description', Wittgenstein means the elucidation of the place concepts occupy in our language games. The importance of this

reminder is due to the frequent accusation that Wittgenstein has turned away from substantive issues, to concentrate on questions concerning language. It has even been said that those influenced by him make the reality of God merely a matter of language. That is a bad misunderstanding. The appeal to language is not an evasion of God's reality, but an exploration of the grammar of that very notion.

Granting the above conclusion, some readers of Wittgenstein still insist that some criticisms made by him and those influenced by him go beyond description. The criticisms are ethico-religious criticisms which are an expression of a certain religious sensibility. This is clearly the case, it is argued, when Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for his spiritual narrowness. Is it not also true when criticisms are made of a prudential, compensatory religion? Are these not cases of prescription rather than description? If one calls these confusions, must one not appeal to *some* religious belief in order to make one's point? In this sense, it may be said, there is no such thing as a non-theological philosophy of religion.

Must the above conclusion be accepted? When distinctions are made between certain religious concepts and prudence, for example, the objections are to the logical possibility of prudentially based analyses of *those concepts*. For example, it is logically impossible to decide to feel remorse for what one has done, because one is afraid of being found out, either by a fellow human being or God. Remorse simply is not a fear of being found out. This conceptual point concerning remorse would apply within a variety of different ethico-religious beliefs. For example, it would apply both to self-denying Christianity and to a self-fulfilling warrior ethico-religion.

Similar issues arise in the fifth symposium's discussion of the theological reception of Wittgenstein's work. From one point of view, it looks as though Wittgenstein has had little effect on theology. On the one hand, the great theologians of the twentieth century wrote before Wittgenstein's work became available. If they heard of it at all, they accepted second-hand accounts of it which misunderstood it. On the other hand, many theologians were influenced by Continental traditions of philosophy, and, as a result, simply ignored his work.

Yet, deeper questions lie behind the issue of Wittgenstein's influence on theology. What kind of influence is one talking of? Isn't there a misunderstanding involved in the thought that philosophy can be used for theological purposes? After all, traditionally, systematic theology has been linked to metaphysical assumptions. Since much of Wittgenstein's work is an attack on such assumptions, an attack on the view that language or life has the unity of a system, it is difficult to see how there could be a systematic theology informed by Wittgenstein's philosophy. The main contribution of his philosophy, it seems, would be the provision of clarifications which help us to avoid confusion. For example, the confusion in Cartesian dualism is rampant in theology. Yet, the clarification which may help us to avoid such confusion is not itself a substantive part of the theology which has been helped by it. That theology will be free of conceptual confusion, that is all.

Someone may respond to these arguments by asking why it is assumed that in order to be systematic, theology must propound a system. To be systematic is simply to have due regard for consistency and coherence. In this respect, surely, Wittgenstein's work can help a theologian. On the other hand, the theologian's task is different from Wittgenstein's. The theologian must go beyond description. After

all, religiously, or theologically, there is a plurality of perspectives marked by grammatical differences. Faced by these, the theologian must come to a conclusion which is confessional in character. That does not mean that confessional truths are simply given 'all at once'. They emerge from an open-ended dialogue which has no finality underwritten by philosophy. This is because the theological and religious search is one that each person must pursue for him or her self. This does not lead to an individualistic relativism, since religious traditions and paradigm figures determine the parameters, broad though they may be, within which the individual's search takes place. Nor does it rule out the possibility, albeit a rare one, of an individual or group extending our conceptions of religious and theological parameters.

The final discussion raised more general questions about the relation of Wittgenstein's work to the cultural context in which it occurred. It was suggested that his admiration for Spengler's theory of culture helps us to understand, not only his own attitude towards his work, but also the character of that work itself.

Spengler held that cultures, like plants, go through stages of birth, growth and decay. Wittgenstein, it is said, shared his view that Western culture is now in decay. The cultural emphasis on technology, with its passion for problem-solving and results, made Wittgenstein feel that he was writing for a small group of people. Apart from bequeathing a certain jargon, he thought his work would be largely misunderstood. This was not elitism on his part. He simply thought that this is how things were. He felt as though he were in exile.

Can this sense of exile throw light on the character of his work? Is there not a parallel with his central contention that language is exiled in metaphysical systems, far from its natural home? Again, just as the exile longs to return home, does not Wittgenstein, in his work, strive to bring words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use?

Is this reading of Wittgenstein's relation to his work itself too theoretical? Does it not neglect the fact that although Wittgenstein found Spengler interesting, he was highly critical of his theory of culture? In particular, he resisted Spengler's ideas on *what* must happen in a culture, and, instead, invited us to reflect on *what* does happen. Some argue that there are times when Wittgenstein fell foul of his own advice. For example, he seemed to have thought that only religion can give unity to a culture.

If Wittgenstein had agreed on a notion of necessity in cultural development, he would have been going back to notions of logical necessity from which he freed himself after the *Tractatus*. He would have been going back to the hardness of the logical 'must' discussed in the first two symposia. Instead, Wittgenstein emphasizes, again and again, that if one believes in certain values one will fight for them; one's actions will be informed by them. If the times are unpropitious, one's efforts may be thwarted. For Wittgenstein, there is no necessity in cultural development which underlies our lives with concepts.

In the light of these considerations, is there anything that can be said about the effects which Wittgenstein's way of philosophizing could or should have on the way we live? If Wittgenstein's aim is clarification, does it not make sense to envisage a culture in which there would be a common understanding free of confusion? In the first two symposia it was noted how Wittgenstein turned his back on the notion of

a common logical space occupied by all speakers of language, in which, in principle, every thought is available to every speaker. On the other hand, we were discouraged from thinking that, as a result, Wittgenstein turned to a conception of language games logically cut off from each other, such that a participant in one cannot contradict what is said or done in another, or say that it is wrong. If such reactions are possible, is that not an admission that there is something in other points of view which calls for understanding? Is there not some kind of answer one should be able to arrive at? This need not mean that one thinks of the answer as already existing, or as simply waiting to be discovered. It may be the kind of answer that can only be arrived at through an exploration which takes us beyond our mere differences. It is in this regard, it is suggested, that it makes sense to entertain hopes of the intellectual unity of mankind.

But what *kind* of hope is being envisaged in the conception of the intellectual unity of mankind, or in the conception of a common understanding between people which is free from confusion? It may be said that to entertain such a hope is not to make a prediction concerning its realization. It is rather a matter of the spirit in which one approaches other people, one in which one seeks to understand them.

Doubts may still be expressed about the character of this hope. What people can and cannot understand will be affected by where they stand morally and religiously. That is something a philosopher has to understand. A more primitive hope, for a culture exhibiting a common agreement free from confusion, may seem like a romantic illusion. It is quite feasible to imagine a specific disagreement becoming agreement through further discussion, or a particular confusion being overcome. It is an altogether different matter, however, to imagine a culture in which people do not differ in any way with respect to what they value or think important. Can we imagine a spoken language free from confusion among its speakers? To many, this seems to be, not a hope for a better human life, but a denial of a human life altogether.

In this introduction I have sought to do no more than to introduce some of the main issues discussed in this collection, and the disagreements surrounding them. As I said at the outset, there are many different readings of Wittgenstein's philosophy. I have placed the discussion notes which I took during the conference at the end of each section. Despite the fact that some symposiasts gave me copies of their opening statements in discussion, I have used letters of the alphabet to indicate different speakers. This is because, in general, the discussion notes do not claim to be verbatim reports. Readers will find it easy to identify the symposiasts, but contributions were also made by visiting philosophers, members of the audience, and by my colleagues and students at Claremont. I think they add to the value of the volume. Where there were convergences of points of view, I have not hesitated to express them through a single voice.

The disagreements, as well as the agreements, found in the discussions testify to the richness and complexity of Wittgenstein's legacy in the philosophy of religion.