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Thinking Differently: Wittgenstein on Religious Forms of Life

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Abstract: The wrong idea that Wittgenstein proposes a version of hinge epistemology has stalled progress in understanding and applying his insights into religious life. The concepts of "belief system" and "hinge proposition" were nothing more than metaphors for Wittgenstein, not theoretical posits. The misinterpretation of that point by hinge epistemologists has obscured and diminished what Wittgenstein means when he says that religious believers "think differently" than non-believers do. The difference is not merely a matter of fundamental assumptions, as hinge epistemology suggests, but a matter of living and thinking *entirely* differently, so that our ordinary concepts of "belief", "assumption", "inference", and so on fundamentally misrepresent them. To understand such different modes of living, Wittgenstein's philosophy implies that we must strive to see life from the believer's point of view. We must give up trying to explain other ways of life and instead strive to "catch on" to what it would be like to live as others live, to think as they do.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; religion; fideism; belief; hinge epistemology; D. Z. Phillips; rationality

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In a 2010 article, Alejandro Tomasini Bassols makes a compelling case that we should be rid of the "harmful myth" that Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* advances a version of hinge epistemology (Bassols 2010, p. 83). The course of Wittgenstein's philosophical development away from logical atomism, the central insights of his later philosophy, and a nuanced reading of *On Certainty* that is consistent with that later philosophy all count against the idea. In philosophy of religion, the myth of Wittgenstein's hinge epistemology has done especially grave harm. As Modesto Alonso Gomez notes in a recent essay, over the last two decades or so it "has been a pet project for hinge epistemologists to read Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief in light of his way of characterizing so-called 'Moore propositions' or 'hinge commitments'. . ." (Gómez Alonso 2021, p. 18). The result is a series of essays that repeat debates dating back to the 1960s that pitted the so-called neo-Wittgensteinians—D.Z. Phillips, Rush Rhees, and Peter Winch—against numerous anti-Wittgensteinians, including Kai Nielsen, John Hick, and others. Both the earlier and current debates consider such issues as the groundlessness of religious hinges, how and to what extent they differ from secular hinges, the epistemological equivalence of secular and religious hinges, and the isolation of religious beliefs and language-games from rational criticism. Clack is right when he says that "discussions of Wittgenstein's views on religion have come to something of a standstill" (Clack 2016, p. 192).

I argued for a different reading of Wittgenstein on religious belief nearly twenty years ago (Hoyt 2007), but the issue seems worth returning to now for two reasons. First, because hinge epistemology has since gained popularity and influence and stalled the progress that Wittgenstein's thought promises to help us make. Second, because I did not then do an adequate job expressing the more profound and enlightening vision of religious belief

and life that I believe Wittgenstein's philosophy suggests. In my earlier essay, I argue that the term "hinge proposition" and the concept of a "belief system" were not theoretical constructs for Wittgenstein, but simply metaphors intended to throw a certain light on examples of religious life. Wittgenstein's awareness of the limits of their utility is shown by the fact that he sometimes employs different metaphors with different implications. One of the most important is the metaphor of being guided by a picture, as when he says, for example, that religion provides "[rules] of life dressed up in pictures" (Wittgenstein 1998, CV, p. 29). In keeping with his later philosophy, this remark is intended neither as a speculative psychological hypothesis nor a philosophical theory about the logical structure of religious belief. On the contrary, Wittgenstein is hunting for a metaphor that will help us see our way clear of such misguided speculation. "If I say he used a picture", Wittgenstein (1967) says elsewhere, "I don't want to say anything [the believer] himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions" (LC, p. 71).

The fact that the metaphor of a picture can replace the metaphor of a belief system in our philosophical considerations is intended to remind us that both are indeed merely metaphors intended to help us see more clearly the facts of how people live, the facts regarding what they do and say. Neither the picture nor the belief system has its own reality that can be theoretically or scientifically described in objective terms and neither can be an explanation of the ways we act or the things we say. The mistake is closely analogous to the one that Thomas Szasz spent his career fighting in psychiatry: we use a given psychological term like "depression" to pick out a particular pattern in the weave of life, a certain pattern in the things people say and do. Yet in both the popular and medical imagination, we then turn around and treat "depression" as an underlying cause of the very facts that were the grounds for the diagnosis. This is totally unlike the case of diagnosing a physical illness from a set of symptoms. To have diabetes is not to suffer a set of symptoms, it is to suffer an insulin deficiency that causes problems metabolizing sugar. When a doctor treats diabetes, they treat the insulin deficiency, not the symptoms. To have depression, however, is, essentially, to have a set of symptoms. To protest that the underlying cause of depression is also a hormone imbalance will not do. If a person had low serotonin but suffered no symptoms of depression, we would not call that person depressed and we would not treat them with pharmaceuticals. If a person had insulin deficiency but suffers no symptoms, we surely would treat the problem before the inevitable symptoms showed up (Szasz 1960).

The analogy with psychiatry is meant to help us see that hinge epistemology is guilty of a category mistake, a mistake that Wittgenstein does not make. When we talk about depression, we are not talking about a thing. "It is not a something, but not a nothing either!" (Wittgenstein 1997, PI, §304). To speak of "depression" is to talk about a person's words, gestures, actions, history, and context in a particular way, it is to pick out a certain pattern in the weave of life. Similarly, when we speak of the "belief system" of a person or a culture, we are talking about certain patterns in how they think, speak, and act. Hinge epistemology has evolved into a sizeable branch of philosophy housing a variety of theories[1] and it would be a distraction to get into the weeds of all that it contains. So far, as I am aware, they all make the same fundamental mistake, from Wittgenstein's perspective, which is to treat belief systems as structures that have their own explanatory force. The mistake is very much like regarding depression as an internal state only signaled outwardly by symptoms rather than as a convenient conceptual framing of the symptoms themselves. Consider the position of Daniele Moyal-Sharrock, a leading figure in hinge epistemology and one who considers herself to be explicating Wittgenstein's work. Moyal-Sharrock rightly understands that beliefs are not sentences or propositions exerting force within a literal mechanism. "There is a *categorical* difference, not a difference of degree, between

rules that *underlie* thinking and propositions" (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 79), she writes. However, Moyal-Sharrock does not recognize that the concept of a "belief system" is, for Wittgenstein, merely a metaphorical description of how a person or a people tend to speak and to live. Moyal-Sharrock sees that hinge beliefs are an "enacted know-how", not propositions, but the system of knowledge built on top of that enacted know-how is propositional, in her view, and more or less what traditional epistemologies propose:

> The structural metaphors which inform foundational and coherence theories are good ones; they eloquently render the nature and position of our basic beliefs in our doxastic systems, and therefore there is no reason for not using the same structural metaphors. But traditionally, philosophers have crucially distorted the nature of our basic beliefs: by putting them into sentences, they thought they were dealing with propositions. So that Wittgenstein adopts this picture but effects the correction.
>
> (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 78)

It is the resurrection of this traditional picture of belief systems by hinge epistemologists that obscures the real lessons of *On Certainty*, and which undermines seeing what is most profound and enlightening in his remarks on religion. The theory of hinge beliefs suggests that all human thinking has essentially the same form: it operates within one or another system of assumptions and inferences that are logically interconnected. This picture implies that the concepts of "reason", "reasonableness", "implication", and "belief" transcend our own language-games and manage to describe characteristics of all possible language-games, of all possible ways of thinking. Witness the following passage from Duncan Prichard's essay, "Faith and Reason":

> . . .what all our hinge commitments express is our basic certainty that we are not radically and fundamentally in error. Call this our *über hinge commitment.* It is this commitment that Wittgenstein thinks needs to be in place in order for one to be a rational subject who undertakes rational evaluations. Our other, more specific, hinge commitments—that one has two hands, that one has never been to the moon, etc.—are merely expressions of our basic über hinge commitment.
>
> (Prichard 2017, p. 111)

By projecting this picture of rationality onto all possible forms of life, Prichard claims to explain the nature of religious belief and to justify its epistemic equivalence to secular belief:

> The crux of the matter is that the basic religious convictions of one who has faith will form part of that person's hinge commitments, and hence will be part of the bedrock against which rational evaluations are undertaken.
>
> (Prichard 2017, pp. 117–18)

Rational thought operates according to the same principles in both religious and secular thought, Pritchard is saying, but each begins from its own groundless foundation. Pritchard writes:

> The religious believer's overall set of commitments thus includes fundamental commitments which are more a matter of faith than of reason, but this fact alone doesn't mark any epistemically significant difference between the life of faith and the life lived without it.
>
> (Prichard 2017, p. 118)

The idea that we all think alike but for our basic "commitments" or "hinge beliefs" is comforting, but it misses what I believe is one of the most profound insights that

Wittgenstein has to teach us about religion and about human life: people can and do think *altogether* differently than us.

It is the picture of hinge epistemology that leads Prichard to believe that he can speak about "rationality" and "rational subjects" in absolute terms, as though he could step outside our language-games and use the concept of "rationality" to describe a necessary condition of human thought. *On Certainty* is full of reminders that our philosophical investigations must be conscious of the fact that we, as investigators, cannot step outside of our own language this way. Consider the following passages reminding us that "to know" is an instrument of *our* language-games:

> 11. We just do not see how very specialized the use of "I know" is.
>
> 18. "I know" often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know. The other, if he is acquainted with the language-game, must be able to imagine how one may know something of the kind.
>
> 230. We are asking ourselves: what do we do with a statement "I know. . ."? For it is not a question of mental processes or mental states.
>
> 367. Isn't it the purpose of construing a word like "know" analogously to "believe" that then opprobrium attaches to the statement "I know" if the person who makes it is wrong? As a result a mistake becomes something forbidden.
>
> 443. Suppose that in a certain language there were no word corresponding to our "know".—The people simply make assertions. . . .
>
> 562. At any rate it is important to imagine a language in which *our* concept 'knowledge' does not exist.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the word "our" in *On Certainty* §562 is essential because it reminds us that his descriptions of knowledge and certainty in that book are parochial, so to say. The "we" and "our" he speaks of in *On Certainty* is not the community of all humankind, but a community with a common culture and education. Ours is a community that we might regard as encompassing most educated moderns, but it is nonetheless a community bounded by convention, not epistemological necessity. Wittgenstein (1969) writes:

> 'We are quite sure of it' does not mean that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education.
>
> (OC, §298)

We are educated to expect certain standards of evidence and argument in the various domains in which those concepts operate. Furthermore, we are educated to prize the ideal of a unified system of belief that extends from everyday observations to the furthest reaches of science. Our science and education include practices that we call "making arguments" and "giving reasons", and those practices, too, are conventional. The fact that our arguments proceed from premises to conclusions as they do is something that has evolved within *our* forms of life. That is why Wittgenstein says that our system of testing a hypothesis "belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life" (OC §105). Hinge epistemology treats belief systems exactly like points of departure, foundations upon which arguments are formulated no matter what the grounding assumptions might be. Were you to accept the other's premises, hinge epistemology tells us, you would think as she does.

Both within *On Certainty* and beyond, it is clear that Wittgenstein is urging us to accept the more radical idea that people can and do think more differently than hinge epistemology allows. This is not a theoretical possibility, but a plain matter that we can clearly observe if only we allow ourselves to see the facts for what they are. In his "Lectures on Religious

Belief", Wittgenstein emphasizes the fact that Christian believers "base enormous things" on evidence that even the believer would regard as "exceedingly flimsy" were he doing history. "Am I to say they are unreasonable?" Wittgenstein asks, "I wouldn't call them unreasonable" (LC, p. 58). Nor would he call them reasonable, for the concept is misleading in this territory. If someone were to base his conviction on the reality of a Judgement Day on a dream, says Wittgenstein, it is not evidence at all by the standards we apply to ordinary empirical claims such as the claim that it will rain tomorrow. But "Why should I regard this dream as evidence—measuring its validity as though I were measuring the evidence for meteorological events?" (LC, p. 61) That is not how Christians integrate such "beliefs" and "evidence" into their lives, and nothing is gained by insisting that they must think as the non-believer thinks, abide by the rules of evidence and inference that the non-believer abides by. In religious life, reasons often "look entirely different from normal reasons" (LC, p. 56). When considering what to say about someone who believes that illness is punishment for sin, Wittgenstein simply describes the facts of the situation as they stand: "I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures" (LC, p. 55). It is essential that Wittgenstein makes no effort to *explain* how it is that people can think so differently. The fact of the matter is that they do, and the metaphor of belief systems will be useful only insofar as it helps us see the other's form of life, their way of thinking and speaking, for what it is. Our forms of life are the given in Wittgenstein's philosophy (PIii, p. 226), not language or belief, and "Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement?" (LC, p. 58). If the believer's language-games and forms of life exist and perpetuate, we can only witness that a whole different mode of life, thought, and language exists that is radically unlike our own secular ideal. "Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us" (OC, §475). Religious forms of life apply standards of evidence and reasonableness so different from what we find in the rest of those language-games taught in science and education that we are better off saying that "belief" simply has a different meaning in religious contexts (LC, p. 59).

In any number of passages from *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein continues to resist trying to explain what really lies beneath the surface of the observable differences in our forms of life, and to instead settle on their mere description. This tendency can help us see the real lesson in his remarks regarding a tribe that believes that people sometimes visit the moon, remarks that hinge epistemologists routinely misread.

> "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?" If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered. But suppose that instead of all these answers we met the reply: "We don't know how one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.
>
> (OC, §108)

The "system" that Wittgenstein has in mind here is an abstract representation of our language-games and forms of life, the language-games that we acquired through education and science. The system is not something that has its own force, but simply a metaphor that describes how we have been schooled to reason, to live, to speak. Wittgenstein comes to rest on the statement that we should feel "intellectually very distant" from someone who was raised into another mode of life, someone who thinks differently from us all the way

down, so to say. Is there no objective truth? We might insist that we "*know* that no one has been to the moon", but the word "know" says nothing more than that we can supply the sort of evidence that participants in *our* language-games are trained to acknowledge. If the tribe members follow our reasoning and still refuse to accept our conclusions, then we have come to an impasse at which the most accurate thing to say is simply, "they think differently."

The fact that many religious communities actually think differently is enormously important. In one of the few remarks from *On Certainty* which concerns religion explicitly, Wittgenstein considers a real case that parallels the imaginary tribe in the preceding remark. What are we to say about Christians who continue to believe in creationism despite the strength of the evidence we marshal against the idea? Wittgenstein writes:

> But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa.
>
> But is there no objective character here?
>
> *Very* intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former.
>
> (OC, §336)

What forms of educated life culminate in utterance of belief in creationism? There are many common patterns we might describe, but of course the most common is simply for an intelligent and well-educated person to grow up in a Christian community and never choose to leave its way of thinking behind. The skeptic might protest that the believer *must* hold a set of hinge beliefs that resolve the apparent contradictions in their thinking. But why should we assume that? Our talk of hinge beliefs was never more than a metaphor intended to help us make sense of forms of life. Which features of this Christian form of life are best described by way of proposing a belief system that abides by our standards of logic while starting from an alternative set of premises? Moreover, even if there were such features in the religious lives we hope to understand, we must never forget that the description of a belief system is not to be taken literally, it should not be taken as the description of anything that underlies, explains, or justifies the religious life, but merely as a heuristic that helps us see that life more clearly.

It is important to recognize that theories like hinge epistemology and other forms of explanation impede our ability to understand the religious lives we long to make sense of. Wittgenstein's later philosophy implies that we should employ an entirely different mode of understanding, one that is much more enlightening, and it is this feature of his work that I am so keen to emphasize in this essay. The insight is not my own, however. It was made by all three of the neo-Wittgensteinians decades ago, but their good work has since been undermined by hinge epistemology.[2] In "Wittgenstein's Full Stop", Phillips drives at this point while defending Wittgenstein against the charge that his philosophy "ghettoizes" religious language-games by insisting that they operate with concepts and standards of reasoning that shield them from rational criticism. That charge was made by a number of philosophers, but most powerfully articulately by Kai Nielsen in 1967 (Nielsen 1967). Phillips does not deny that religious claims and concepts can only be defined by their roles in religious life, but he insists that this is not the problem critics claim. Wittgenstein's perspective opens up new possibilities of both understanding and criticizing religious forms of life. Phillips opens with a long quote from *Zettel* (Wittgenstein 1981), a portion of which I will include here:

> [Philosophical confusion can often be attributed to] our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it

> the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.
>
> The difficulty here is: to stop.
>
> (Z, §314)

There are certain puzzling facts of human life that the philosopher wants to explain by pointing to something that lies beyond them, a system that supposedly explains why things are the way they are. This is a general tendency that causes trouble in nearly every branch of philosophy, and also in psychology, literary studies, political science, the layman's attempts to understand the nature of love, and much else. For now, however, let us stay focused on the trouble it causes in the study of religion.

In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein (1993b) states that "The very idea of wanting to explain a practice—for example the killing of a priest-king—seems wrong to me" (RFGB, p. 119). The kind of "explanation" that is useful in thinking about religious lives and practices is anything that helps us get a feel for what it would be like to live as the other lives, to think as the other thinks. Authentic understanding takes the form of being able to sympathize with the other, to see the sense that their words and actions make to them. Phillips writes, "Wittgenstein's reasons for rejecting Frazer's explanations is not that they are false, but that they are explanations and as such take us away from the *philosophically arresting* features of the rituals he is discussing" (Phillips 1981, p. 92, my emphasis). Consider Frazer's historical explanation of the Beltane Fire Festivals. No matter what historical events molded the festivals into the present forms that they take, getting in touch with the meaning they (might) have for participants requires us to see them as participants do. Wittgenstein writes:

> . . . the fact that on certain days children burn a straw-man should make us uneasy, even if no explanation for it were given. Strange that they should burn *a man* as part of the festivities! I want to say: the solution is no more disturbing than the riddle.
>
> (RFGB, p. 151)

The philosophically arresting feature of the festival lies in the very fact that children are drawn to something so disturbing. It is disturbing that children are drawn to something so disturbing, and yet that is how things are. This fact is philosophically arresting because it puts us in touch with the source of meaning the festivals hold. It is an irreducible sort of meaning, one grasped only by seeing the gestures and events under the right aspect. If we want to understand the ritual, we must get in touch with the human reactions people have to them, we must see the ritual gesture as the participants see it, we must have sympathy with how they experience it. Speculative descriptions of the hinge beliefs that underlie the ritual *might* serve as a metaphor to help us achieve that perspective, but they cannot literally explain it. Worse, theoretical explanation in terms of the participants' hinge beliefs is very likely to stand in the way of our being able to grasp the significance of the children's actions and reactions. Instead, we would waste our time trying to explain them as the logical conclusions of a rational inference based on peculiar assumptions. Phillips calls the sort of sensitive, descriptive mode of explanation that brings the meaning of the festival into view "contemplative philosophy", and helpfully says that its goal is always to help us see "how human life can be like that" (Phillips 2007, p. 205), what it is like to live as others live.

Wittgenstein's remarks on ritual are rooted in his understanding that meaning is not something separate from ritual actions, gestures, or words. In keeping with his understanding of meaning in general, meanings must never be thought of as something that accompanies words or actions. Rather, it is the significant use of the words and actions them-

selves that constitutes their meaning, that gives them the character we call "meaningful." This is the point of a passage that has been often quoted in the secondary literature:

> When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. "I am venting my anger." And all rites of are this kind. Sucha actions may be called-instinct-actions.—And an historical explanation, say, that I or my ancestors believed that beating the ground does help is shadow-boxing, for it is a superfluous assumption that explains *nothing*. The similarity of the action to an act of punishment is important, but nothing more than this similarity can be asserted.
>
> (RFGB, p. 139)

A person does not beat a tree with a stick "*in order* to express his anger", says Phillips, "This is the form his anger takes" (Phillips 1981, p. 94). The tantrum is a human gesture, one that springs naturally from the human experience, and the only sort of understanding of the gesture that is legitimate is one that puts us in touch with what it is to live it out. We must see the place it has in human life. Theories and explanations generally have the opposite effect, spiriting us away to a realm of abstractions and guesses about the hidden psychological or metaphysical systems that supposedly justify or explain our gestures.

A ritual can have meaning in much the way that music can, and learning how to understand a ritual is a lot like learning to understand music and musical gestures. Phillips draws an analogy to the following passage in *Zettel*:

> For how can it be explained what 'expressive playing' is? Certainly not by anything that accompanies the playing.—What is needed for the explanation? One might say: a culture.—If someone is brought up in a particular culture—and then reacts to music in such-and-such a way, you can teach him the use of the phrase "expressive playing".
>
> (Z, §164)

To understand the performance of a piece of music, one needs to have a sense of its cultural context, the possible interpretations that the music offers, and so on. It is that background that can make sense of the particular gestures of a performance—the arrangement, the points that are stressed and those that are softened, the subtle shifts in tempo. The same sort of thing can be said for understanding a ritual gesture: the celebration of a human being's entrance into a life in Christendom through baptism, for example, or a couple's union through marriage. In each of these cases, genuine understanding takes the form of getting in touch with the sense that these things make in the lives of participants.

Nielsen's charge that "Wittgensteinian fideism"ghettoizes religious language-games reflects his own unwillingness to give up a particular theory of meaning. He begins well enough by correctly pointing out that religious discourse is not a language unto itself, but a particular use of language that is held in common with both science and common sense. "Religious discourse is not something isolated, sufficient unto itself", Nielsen protests, "'sacred discourse' shares categories with, utilises the concepts of, and contains the syntactical structure of, 'profane discourse'" (Nielsen 1967, p. 207). So when the believer says that "God created the earth 5000 years ago", the atheist is perfectly capable of entering into conversation with them, and perfectly right to reject the statement as senseless if no evidence can be even be imagined that would count for or against it, and false if the evidence shows that it does not correspond with reality. The verificationist standard of sense, Nielsen insists, extends across all domains of discourse:

> 'Witches are out on Hallowe'en' is a putative factual statement. It supposedly does assert that a certain identifiable state-of-affairs obtains. It supposedly is like saying The Klan is out on Hallowe'en'. But the factual intelligibility of the former is not evident, for it is not clear what counts as a witch.
>
> (p. 209)

A similar assessment might or might not prove that "God created the world" is senseless, says Nielsen, but the method of assessment is sound. Nielsen is savvy enough to recognize that we would need to consider the details of how the believer uses "create", "world", and "God", to be sure that we were not making a gross error, but in the end, claims are claims about how the world is. "...[W]hen it is claimed—as presumably people who seriously utter certain religious propositions claim—that the facts asserted by these religious propositions are such and such, their claims must be open to some possible confirmation or disconfirmation: their claims must be publicly testable" (Nielsen 1967, pp. 202–3). A perfectly fair assessment might show that assertions of God's existence are senseless or that they are false, just as we now believe that our ancestors' assertions of the existence of fairies turned out to be false.

Nielsen's mistake is to ignore Wittgenstein's insight that "... not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition is one" (OC, §308) along with the lesson that Wittgenstein emphasizes in the first 40 or so remarks on the *Philosophical Investigations*: language has countless uses. Meaning is use, and the uses of language are inextricably bound up with the forms of life in which they play the particular roles that they play. Again, life, not language, is the given. In his "Lecture on Ethics", Wittgenstein (1993a) imagines seeing two people batting around a tennis ball but not following the rules of tennis (LE, p. 38). We can imagine children doing this. We obviously have no grounds to say that the children are doing something wrong, that they are playing "incorrectly" simply because they are not playing tennis. Nor do we have grounds to insist that they must follow any other set of explicit rules. Analogously, the way that a Christian uses the concepts of "belief" and "evidence" obviously does not conform to standards that Nielsen proposes, and there is nothing to be gained by insisting that they ought to or that, deep down, they already do—it is just that Christians somehow organize their lives around a bunch of sentences that convey no meaning at all. That makes no sense, from a Wittgensteinian point of view: the meaning is the use. We can easily observe that the concept of "belief", the standards of "evidence", and the implications of "exists" are being used differently in religious life than they are in other domains. A very intelligent, well-educated Christian might respond to Nielsen by saying, "we're not playing that sort of game over here." Wittgenstein and Phillips urge us to jump in, either literally or in our imaginations, until we grasp how others play the games they do.

Let us approach the issue from another angle. Whereas Nielsen insists that religious claims must function like ordinary statements of fact despite their ostensible differences, many readers of Wittgenstein have taken that difference to imply that what appear to be religious claims are not claims at all. One common strategy is to say that what appear to be religious claims are, in fact, merely expressions of feelings or attitude.[3] This view is commonly referred to as "expressivism", and a number of Wittgenstein's remarks at least seem to support this interpretation. Here is one that is often cited:

> Election by grace: It is only permissible to write like this out of the most frightful suffering—& then it means something quite different. But for this reason it is not permissible for anyone to cite it as truth, unless he himself says it in torment.—It simply isn't a theory.—Or as one might also say: if this is truth, it is not the truth it appears at first glance to express. It's less a theory than a sigh, or a cry.
>
> (CV, pp. 34–35)

To read this as saying that to claim the truth of predestination is *merely* an expression of subjective feeling is too reductive. Wittgenstein's expression, "It's *less* a theory than a sigh", shows that he is hunting for an expression that will help us see the claim in its proper light, not that he has landed on a reductive account. The statement has its own particular place in the lives of believers, and while we might gain some insight by "translating" it into the terms of another mode of discourse, doing so cannot reveal the "true meaning" of the original statement. Meaning is not that sort of thing. Wittgenstein's tentative reduction is intended to help us abandon the pernicious idea that language that looks like an ordinary claim must be an ordinary claim. We must always attend to the details of how an expression is actually used in its native context.

Here it is useful to return to the analogy with psychological expressions. When caught in the grip of the picture in which minds are private realms inside each person, it seems that our psychological expressions must refer either to private hidden facts or to public behavioral facts. The central lesson of Wittgenstein's remarks on psychology is that our psychological language-games operate altogether differently, generally not as descriptions of states or processes, but in all manner of other ways in the course of our dealings with other people. They play manifold, complex roles, most of which cannot be seen accurately when we are caught in the grip of the mind/body picture and the idea that our expressions denote states and processes. To understand our psychological expressions, we must be prepared to look at their actual uses in our lives. Following a long series of remarks challenging the assumption that our psychological expressions name private states inside us, Wittgenstein (1958) writes:

> Am I saying something like, "and the soul itself is merely something about the body"? No. (I am not that hard up for categories.).
>
> (RPPII, §690)

The categorical binaries we insist on—in this case, inner/outer, or, mind/body—doom us to misunderstanding what we are talking about when we talk about minds, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and so on. The assumption that our psychological expressions must name states and processes, either hidden or public, is at the heart of the matter. "The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent." (PI, §308). From that point forward, we will be tempted by spurious philosophical and psychological theories of mind which seem to make sense of why our language-games are so complicated. We will be tempted by the false idea that the complications in our language-games reflect the complicated nature of the states and processes we are talking about rather than the complications in the forms of life that are the real source of difficulty. This is a mistake that Wittgenstein is keen to head off in *On Certainty* as well, and he again does so by reminding us that our investigations of knowledge and certainty are grounded in investigations of "knowledge" and "certainty":

> 'Knowledge' and 'certainty' belong to different categories. They are not two 'mental states' like, say 'surmising' and 'being sure'.
>
> (OC, §308)

The religious language and forms of life that Wittgenstein calls our attention to are examples that defy the categorical limits of both Nielsen and expressivism. The Christian who believes in predestination is neither making an empirical claim, as Nielsen understands them to be, nor merely venting a subjective feeling, as the expressivist suggests. Neither of those categories does justice to the facts.

Let us leave the realm of abstract argument and consider examples of unusual religious thinking. I think it is fair to say that anthropologists have moved further away from the sort of reductive explanation to which Wittgenstein objects towards the mode of rich description

that he favors, and I want to consider two cases from their discipline. First, the example of the Fore people of Papua New Guinea who were, in the recent past, one of many who ritually ate the corpses of their kinsmen. "The entire corpse was prepared for a feast, and close relatives were allowed to consume certain parts of the corpse. The daughters of the deceased ate the head; the widow took the genitals and intestines; women who went to grieve with the widow consumed any of the remaining meat, and men consumed the flesh of the arms, legs, and torso" (Kim 2023, p. 77). Fore cosmology implied the necessity of mortuary rites, but both in principle and in practice various methods were sanctioned. "In the Fore region bodies could be disposed of by burial; by placing them in a basket, or on a platform, in a bamboo or yellow sugar cane grove; or by transumption" (Whitfield 2008, pp. 3721–22). The choice to consume the dead did not emerge directly from their cosmology, but was rather elected as a means of expressing reverence:

> . . . the Fore believed it was much better that the body was eaten by people who loved the deceased than by worms and insects. By eating the dead, they were able to show their love and to express their grief.
>
> (Whitfield 2008, p. 3722)

Though it might be startling and alien, it is not so difficult for a modern Westerner to make sense of this gesture in the way that Wittgenstein intends: by striving to relate to it, to imagine what it would be like to express one's love by saving a corpse from such a defiling, loveless end. We express our grief differently, of course, and we could not express our own grief through transumption because the gesture would lack the cultural surroundings that give it the significance that it held for the Fore. Nonetheless, we can see the sense it could make in human life—the sense that it did make in the lives of the Fore, if Whitfield's ethnography is right.

The second example does more to bring into focus the challenge that *On Certainty* poses to the philosophical dream of universal rationality, the philosopher's delusion that there is not "any epistemically significant difference between the life of faith and the life lived without it." In "Possession and exorcism in the Muslim migrant context", Dmitriy Oparin looks at belief and practices involving exorcism amongst contemporary Muslim immigrants in Moscow. Oparin begins with a number of reasons why he will not impose any particular conceptual or theoretical framework, since any would inevitably distort our understanding. Along with his own considerations, Oparin cites the following helpful remarks on the method made by some of his peers:

> "possession is not a 'thing' to be explained, but a complex series of patterns of thinking and behavior.".
>
> (Cohen 2008, p. 5)

> The underdetermined quality of human action became especially salient for me as I thought about spirit possession and saw how inadequate it was to reduce it to a variety of casual and motivational factors that entirely failed to do justice to the complexity of the genre, the unique combination of passion and action, or the integrity and creativity of the spirit mediums.
>
> (Lambek 2015, p. xvi)

Oparin notes that cases usually begin when a "patient" diagnoses themselves as possessed by a djinn (evil spirit) following some form of personal crisis: a crisis at home or at work, a medical crisis, a crisis of faith, or merely an immediate feeling of having been possessed (Oparin 2020, pp. 737–38). While this might lead us to think that the patients are merely turning to help where they can get it—from a mullah rather than a doctor, which they cannot afford—Oparin points out that for these Muslims, crises always have a religious

cast (Oparin 2020, pp. 741–45). The work of healing looks partly like magic—a force to fight cancer—and partly like a form of therapy that assumes a pious life offers social harmony, peace of mind, and healthy habits. The religious, the magical, and the pragmatic threads of exorcism can hardly be unwound in the thoughts and lives of believers.

The reader might want to protest, "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it false that exorcism can cure cancer?" If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that exorcism cannot cure cancer (though we might allow a remote chance that it can induce a state of mind that has a beneficial effect on the body, but that is beside the point). However, there is no stepping outside our language-games and our forms of life to insist that exorcism *really* does not cure cancer. And what if the believer understands our reasons, as it sounds like Oparin's subjects do, and responds, "We don't know how exorcism cures cancer, but those who are cured know that it works; and even you can't explain everything?" There is nothing much left to say except that they and I think differently. I might try to persuade them to think as I do, but there is no final position outside our two ways of thinking from which to decide which of us is right.

Critics are right that Wittgenstein's philosophy implies that the rationality and reasonableness of religious language-games cannot be judged in epistemically neutral terms, but wrong to consider this a problem that philosophy must, or even can, solve. There is no position outside our forms of life, outside our language-games, from which to describe and compare systems. In other words, the worry that Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion ends is a variety of fideism is rooted in a false binary of faith and reason that Wittgenstein rejects from the outset. On the other hand, once we have done the work of trying to understand another people in the descriptive mode that Wittgenstein's work implies that we should, the mode that Phillips calls "contemplative philosophy", nothing bars us from passing judgment as fellow human beings. There are no rules regarding which judgments are fair and which are not. We will simply have to plod along doing our best to balance a decent respect for difference with a decent respect for our own convictions. R. H. Sales makes relatively quick work of describing human sacrifice in ancient Judaism, which was not widely practiced or sanctioned but did sometimes happen, in terms that make it comprehensible to modern Christians:

> Second Isaiah offered a reinterpretation of human sacrifice in the form of the suffering servant (regardless as to how the servant is identified), and following the notion that blood atones for sin, the blood of an innocent man or nation, even though vicariously offered, was still the greatest offering possible.
>
> (Sales 1957, p. 113)

Even so, neither modern Christians nor modern atheists are compelled to accept human sacrifice as morally permissible. Either might stand their ground and insist that those ancients who practiced human sacrifice had developed forms of life that we cannot abide, that we see as morally repugnant. Were we to encounter a living people who practice human sacrifice today and could not reach an understanding through conversation, we might try other techniques of persuasion such as those used by missionaries to convert natives. Failing those, we might have no option but brute force (OC, §612). Such is the human condition.

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Notes

[1] Two anthologies containing a variety of prominent views begin to illustrate this expanding branch of philosophy (Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Sandis and Moyal-Sharrock 2022). Still more variations can be found in other books and journals.

[2] I do not mean to say that the neo-Wittgensteinians have everything right: I side with Gordan Graham in thinking that they overplay the idea that religious belief is grounded in one or another "picture of the world" (Graham 2014, pp. 55–70).

[3] The following are a few notable examples: (Cook 1983; McGuiness 1982; Mounce 1973; Ayer 1980, p. 92; O'Hear 1984, pp. 10–12).

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