Senses and Sensibilities

D.Z Phillips

I

I came to know Gareth Moore's work, initially, by being asked to be the publisher's reader for what was later published as *Believing in God* (T.&T. Clark 1988). The book presents one of the most masterly analyses of "belief in God" in the philosophy of religion. The original title of the manuscript was "God as Nothing," in which it was argued that we cannot understand belief in God without understanding what it means to become nothing before him. I suggested, foolishly perhaps, that the title should be changed. On the one hand, given a culture that emphasizes rights more than obligations, I feared that talk of human beings as "nothing" would be mistaken for a denigration of them. On the other hand, I feared that the denial of God as a "something" would be misunderstood as reductionism, or even atheism. The change of title, while it makes central the author's concern with belief in God, does not indicate the distinctiveness of its discussions. In any event, the book has not had the attention it deserves.

I invited Gareth Moore to the annual philosophy of religion conference at Claremont Graduate University more often than any other speaker. He read the following papers: "Tradition, Authority and the Hiddenness of God" published in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (Macmillan 1995); "Death and Transcendence," published in *Religion without Transcendence?* ed. D.Z Phillips and Timothy Tessin (Macmillan 1997); and "Hearing the Voice of God" to be published in *Biblical Concepts and Our World* ed. D.Z Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Palgrave). In this paper, however, I want to concentrate on a paper read by Gareth Moore in 2000, "Wittgenstein's English Parson: some reflections on the reception of Wittgenstein in the philosophy of religion" to be published in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, ed. D.Z Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Ashgate).

II

Gareth Moore writes, "Wittgenstein and his followers have certainly not succeeded in changing the agenda in philosophy of religion." For the most part, it is business as usual. He asks why this should be so. He tries to see things from the point of view of those who feel an antipathy to Wittgenstein's work. Once they admit that he understands their concerns, it may be easier for them to accept his diagnosis of their condition. They

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may be brought to see that we need not settle for saying, as many philosophers do, that we all philosophize as perspectival particularists. The presuppositions of each perspective, it is said, are philosophically controversial, so that any conclusions reached within them are parochial and local; at best they are approximations to reality. These conclusions are embraced by those who call themselves realists; those who hold that reality is independent of anything we say or think.

How do Wittgensteinians look from this perspective? It seems that "Wittgensteinian writers do not claim to have an insight into any reality beyond this world . . . at worst, they merely advocate that people take part in or abstain from certain linguistic and non-linguistic practices . . . the concept of God is not the concept of an objective reality, that such reality as God has consists merely in the fact that people talk about him."

Wittgensteinians will reply that they are concerned with the grammar of "God." Yet, as Gareth Moore says, this reply may simply increase the frustration of the critics. We can say, with Wittgenstein, that part of the grammar of "chair" is that this is what we mean by "sitting on a chair." Nevertheless, our concern is with the existence of a non-linguistic reality, namely, the chair. Shouldn't we say the same of God? But it seems to Richard Messer, and too many others, that whereas "one school exhibited faith in the language of religion referring to an external reality, the other exhibited faith in religious language as a particular framework which worked by its own set of rules."[1]

Gareth Moore brings out that this view of the relation of traditional philosophy to Wittgenstein's work is based on a bad misunderstanding. Whether we are talking about chairs or God, it is to our practices that we have to turn to find out what is meant by their "independent existence." It is not as though we know what this means before we look. As Gareth Moore says, "The example of a chair, far from being a coherent opinion of dissatisfaction with the Wittgensteinian approach, serves only to point out the grammatical difference between "God" and "chair," and so also the difference between the reality of God and the reality of chairs." Having made these points, however, Gareth Moore proceeds, in his own words, "to undermine just a little" the philosophical position he exemplifies so powerfully in his own work. I think the consequences of following him are greater than he realizes.

III

Gareth Moore was kind enough to say that I have "effectively criticized philosophers of the traditional school," but he thinks that I go interestingly astray in certain respects. I argued in "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games" in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, that a person who believes in God out of fear of punishment, acts out of prudence, but lacks religious faith. Gareth Moore says, "What Phillips has to say here looks,

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then, like an example of a Wittgensteinian exercise in philosophy of religion. But is it? Is he making remarks about the concept of God and what counts as believing in God, or is what he says here rather the expression of a particular religious sensibility, one allied to Wittgenstein's own sensibility as expressed in the Lecture on Ethics? . . . There is a great deal in what Phillips says with which I sympathize, but . . . 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?" Gareth Moore thinks that the latter is the case.

If a person acted in the way I criticize, Gareth Moore says that he would be making a religious, theological, but not philosophical mistake. He would be expressing a repugnant view of God. I agree with this, but that is not my point. I argued that anyone who gave an account of religious belief in terms of such actions would be giving an account of prudence, rather than of religious belief. Gareth Moore wants to resist this conclusion on the grounds that, for many people, religion is precisely the prudential policy I criticize. He says it is "the sort of thing we might have expected practically all religious people to say in the past; if we no longer expect very many religious people to say things like this, it is not because we think our modern beliefs are philosophically too sophisticated to say such things, but that people's religious sensibilities have changed."

I think Gareth Moore's distinction between past and present religious sensibilities is far too sweeping. At all times one can find a mixture of religious beliefs and prudence. One can find the mixture even within a single story. The three men threatened by Nebuchadnezzar with the fiery furnace say, at first, that if the king puts them in there, God will get them out. At this level, God and the king seem to be engaged in a common power game. But, immediately the three men go on to say: but if not, even if they are not delivered, they will not bow down before idols. Here, the point of their belief does not depend on a prudential calculation concerning their fate.

Gareth Moore is also too quick to assume that to threaten someone with hell, or to reward them with heaven, must be a form of prudential reasoning. It may be, but it needn't be. The talk of heaven and hell may be internally related to a spiritual concern with one's conduct. When Wittgenstein was asked whether he believed in hell, he said that there was no seriousness without it. He meant that he had it within himself to damn himself. Here, heaven and hell would not be the consequences of proximity or distance from God, but expressions of that very proximity and distance.

Gareth Moore's main contention, however, is that even if God has become what Simone Weil called "a policeman inn the sky," I have no

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right to say that this is not religion. When I do so, he argues, I am not making a philosophical criticism, but simply expressing one religious or theological viewpoint, and rejecting another.

Gareth Moore finds the sensibility he ascribes to me in Wittgenstein too, and draws the same philosophical conclusions from that fact. Wittgenstein in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" responds to Frazer's view that primitive rituals are mistaken empirical hypotheses by saying, "What a narrow spiritual life on Frazer's part! As a result how impossible it was for him to conceive of a life different from that of the England of his time. Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically a present-day English parson with the same stupidity and dullness." Gareth Moore comments, "Wittgenstein's remark about Frazer and the parson is not a philosophical one; it is an expression of Wittgenstein's own religious and human sensibility." On this view, Wittgenstein's and my contribution to the discussion of religion, in this context, is to make a distinction between deep and shallow religion. What we need to learn from Wittgenstein, he argues, is that "there is no such thing as a religious understanding of life and the universe. There is rather a range of religious understandings. The essential distinction to be made amongst these is not that some are correct and others are mistaken, but that some of them will be deep and others shallow. . .His view of what is deep is itself not one which is philosophically founded; it depends on his own personal sensibility." In my own case Gareth Moore sees my sensibility as "fed by writers of a particular spiritual slant, such as Kierkegaard, Simone Weil and Wittgenstein." Philosophically, however, Gareth Moore says that it is important to recognize that "a religious person [may] hold a different religious view from Phillips and still be religious; it is possible for a Christian to hold views repugnant to Phillips and still be Christian."

Gareth Moore applies these conclusions to the wide-ranging disagreements between Richard Swinburne and myself. Swinburne might admit that his talk of belief in God as probable distances him from a great deal in religious language. So what? Gareth Moore says that he has already created that distance in his conception of God as a person without a body. But, then, I too, it is argued, in my claim that belief in the last judgment should not be understood in consequentialist terms, have also distanced myself from a great deal of religious practice. What is plain, according to Gareth Moore is that "in both the traditional and Wittgensteinian schools, philosophical positions seem to go hand and hand with theological positions." For him, the philosopher's task is essentially descriptive, whereas the judgments he finds Wittgenstein and myself making are essentially religious evaluative judgments.

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IV

Gareth Moore's comments raise a number of different issues. One of these involves a common misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's use of "practice." Gareth Moore seems to come close to saying that if something goes on in the name of religion, to criticize it is not to point out any philosophical confusion, but simply to express one's religious preferences. He wants to insist that philosophy should stick to its descriptive task. But, as James Conant said in the discussion of Gareth Moore's paper, "I think, once again, the trouble comes from switching registers when we talk of description. When Wittgenstein talks of description he is showing the role of concepts in our language game. But there is another use of description, a sociological use, which simply refers to what is going on. And one can give a philosophical critique of what is going on by spelling out the implications and surroundings of what is being said. We see that something is a policy, not a faith, so something has gone wrong. So in this way giving a description does have a prescriptive force, but this force comes from spelling out what is involved in the actual use of words. It is not the prescription of preference." So it will not be enough to say, as Gareth Moore did in discussion, "Phillips says that if a practice is done out of fear, what you have is a policy not a religion. But Jesus may be obeyed out of self-interest. That is a religious attitude and many people have it." So far, what is being described is simply what goes on. That, of course, is not denied. But I go on to show how certain concepts are distorted in what goes on. It is impossible on any reading of morality and religion to call faith actions which are only done under threat of punishment. As Kierkegaard says in *Purity of Heart*, such a person does what he would rather not do. So it will not do to react, as Gareth Moore does, by saying, "It is not an attitude of which I approve but if it is the job of the philosopher to describe the role of beliefs in practice, then this practice and attitude cannot be ruled out as not being religious." This misses the sense in which "description," in Wittgenstein's sense, will involve criticism, since it will reveal the distortion as well as the application of concepts. We see how faith can be distorted as prudence.

Gareth Moore thinks that my conclusion comes to grief in the words of the founder of Christianity when he predicts that when the Son of man comes into his glory, with all the nations gathered before him, the sheep will be separated from the goats. To the sheep, on his right hand, the king says, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the World. . ." To the goats on his left hand, he says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . ." Gareth Moore says, "It is just not credible to maintain that Jesus Christ is making a philosophical mistake here, that he is confused over the grammar of "God" – that is, the word "God" as it is used in the Christian tradition. Within that tradition, what Jesus says is

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sayable, by definition."

If Gareth Moore reads these words prudentially, the criticism that faith is reduced to prudence would prevail. The fact that the words are uttered by Jesus would not save them from such criticism. Neither would the words be saved if it were thought that the sheep and the goats are identified externally on the grounds that the former are those who have the correct Christian label. But do we not hear that those who thought they were Christians, but had never shown compassion, turn out to be the goats, whereas those who showed compassion, but did not think of themselves as Christians, turn out to be sheep? But which are which is a judgment known to God. The important emphasis is on seeking such judgment, not in trying to predict it. The last judgment is not one which simply happens to be last: it refers to the relation in which we stand at death, sheep and goats, to the eternal things of God. There are all sorts of theological differences about whether there are any goats, and in many of these, it would not be the job of philosophy to arbitrate. But to think of faith in terms of prudence is both religious and conceptual confusion, which is not to deny that, in the sociological sense, there is a religion which is of a kind which feels the prudential desires.

If we turn to Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," we find there, also, that we cannot simply say, with Gareth Moore, that his concerns are spiritual and emanate from a spiritual sensibility. This would take no account of the reasons which led Wittgenstein to compare magic and metaphysics, and to point out how a magical view of signs may invade rituals. If one thinks of meaning as a kind of power accompanying a word or gesture, one could see how one could be seduced into thinking that words or gestures expressing a longing for the return of the spirit of a dead warrior's necessitate that return; they make it happen.

On the other hand, it is true that Wittgenstein did accuse Frazer of spiritual narrowness. Even here, however, one must be careful not to assume too readily, as I think Gareth Moore does, that his criticism must emanate from a specific religious sensibility to be the expression of a religious preference. In "Religion in Wittgenstein's Mirror" in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, I pointed out that philosophical description, in relation to religion, can show a number of things in its mirror. First, it shows the confusion in thinking that all religious beliefs are confused. Second, it shows that we may give philosophically confused accounts of religious beliefs which are not confused. Third, it shows a distinction between religion and superstition. It will show that religion itself makes a far-reaching contribution to the form superstition may take. Fourth, there will be examples where a pragmatic view may be taken of them. One doesn't quite know what to say about them. One may feel that there is an intellectual distance between us, and people who speak in a certain way. I have left until last the context which concerns Gareth Moore most. I

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discuss examples which are certainly not superstitious, but which may be called ugly, banal, vulgar, or uninteresting. To give one example, in his *Lectures and Conversations* Wittgenstein writes, "Cf. flowers at seance with label. People said: 'Yes, flowers are materialized with label.' What kind of circumstances must there be to make this kind of story not ridiculous?" (p. 61). But even if he did not find them ridiculous, Wittgenstein would not, I suspect, call them impressive. He says that he could imagine people speaking of a miracle if trees bowed immediately after a saint had spoken, but adds, "But I am not so impressed" (*Culture and Value* p. 45). I concluded, "Whether or not he or we find particular expressions of belief high or low, however, is a matter of personal reaction; reactions in which we all speak for ourselves" (p. 250). But is not this exactly what Gareth Moore has been insisting on? Do I not agree with him after all? Not quite.

First, notice the distinction between regarding a religious belief unimpressive, and regarding it as superstitious or confused. On Gareth Moore's view, philosophy would have to say that they are all on the same level, along with religious beliefs Wittgenstein would call deep. Such a view would prevent us, for example, from saying that religious belief has been confused with the policy of prudence.

Second, in many areas of life distinctions are made between the deep and the shallow. It is difficult to see how there could be seriousness without such a distinction. Does philosophy simply say that the distinction is personal and leave it at that? Does it not, in its exploration of concepts, elucidate what the distinction comes to? Further, Gareth Moore is crucially wrong in thinking that the elucidation could only be of a belief one held personally. When Wittgenstein speaks of the ritual slaying of the priest King at Nemi, whose death, while young, is said to keep the soul fresh, he says that that practice may make it look as though it takes the form of a ground and its consequent. Denying this, he insists that belief and practice go together here. But he does not say it is his belief. Nor, in trying to get us to see it in a certain light, is he saying that it would become our belief. Obviously not. But he does say that to see a ritual as the sinister and terrible thing it may be, there must be a related sense of the sinister and terrible in us. One could say that a sense of the things of the spirit is necessary, within and outside philosophy, to appreciate what certain religious beliefs and rituals come to. But these beliefs and rituals may or may not be one's own. How could they all be one's own if they would include the Passion of Christ and the eternity of a Viking warrior? Indeed, one may be unable to personally appropriate a belief or ritual one finds deep in one's own culture, but one can see how human life can be like that, and how the belief goes deep for those who hold it. Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer had to do with his blindness for things of the spirit. One may say that many reductionists have a tin ear where religion is concerned. But on

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the religious side, too, there may be a lack of appreciation of things of the spirit. Only examination of particular lives, of the force certain beliefs have in them, would show whether that lack of appreciation is not only philosophical, but personal too. There is little doubt that Gareth Moore and I would be on the same side of the fence in thinking that contemporary philosophy of religion, when it takes the form of secular or religious apologetics, often lacks appreciation of the things of the spirit. What I am insisting on is that when that appreciation is present in Wittgenstein and others, it exceeds the contours of specific, personal, religious beliefs.

V

Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value*, "Someone may . . . say it's a very grave matter that such and such a man should have died before he could complete a certain piece of work; and yet, in another sense, this is not what matters. At this point one uses the words 'in a deeper sense'" (p. 85). I think I understand these words, and I think Gareth Moore did too. I should be surprised if such an understanding were not present in the religious community to which he belonged. But right now I wish he were still with us to reply, as I know he would, to the criticisms I have made. His was a voice we could not afford to lose.

1 *Does God's Existence Need Proof?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

Gareth Moore's Radical Wittgensteinianism

Howard Robinson

I

Gareth Moore arrived at Corpus to read P. P. E. about two years after I did. We soon became friends, not least because we were always the last two people at the college philosophy society, finishing off the wine. Gareth (who was then known as 'Gary' — a fact he later denied) claimed that in his Finals, he — G. E. Moore — was the only candidate for the new optional paper 'Russell and Wittgenstein'. In 1969, his first year as a graduate student, he moved into 50 Abingdon Road, where I also lived. The landlady was the widow of a man who was said to have taught Edward Heath the organ. Gareth had just returned to the Church. Although we knew that he liked going on

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