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Missing the entire point: Wittgenstein and religion

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Abstract: **In this paper I contrast some widespread ideas about what Wittgenstein said about religious belief with statements Wittgenstein made about his purposes and method in doing philosophy, in order to argue that he did not hold the views commonly attributed to him. These allegedly Wittgensteinian doctrines in fact essentialize religion in a very un-Wittgensteinian way. A truly Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion can only be a personal process, and there can be no part in it for generalized hypotheses or conclusions about religion in general.**

Why is it that in this case I seem to be missing the entire point?[1]

Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of, and approach to, philosophy, at least in his later work, seems clearly to be at odds with standard views of his philosophy of religion. This reflects badly on these standard views. In what follows I look at these views and their likely origins, contrast them with statements Wittgenstein made about his purposes and method in doing philosophy, show how, given the nature of some widely held religious beliefs, Wittgenstein would be violating his own methodology if he really held the views attributed to him, and conclude that he did not hold these views, and that his philosophical method could not lead to any general doctrines about religion, or indeed about anything else. Finally, I look at some of Wittgenstein's remarks that seem to make my argument implausible and explain how I would respond to such a charge, and just what I take the point of Wittgenstein's writing on religion to be.

Sources of the alleged doctrines

The standard views of Wittgenstein on religion that I have in mind are summarized nicely by John Hyman in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*:

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> **Wittgenstein defends two principal doctrines…. The first is that the expression of a religious belief in words is not a prediction or a hypothesis, but 'something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference'; the second is that religious beliefs are therefore equally immune from falsification and from verification.**[2]

The doctrines attributed to Wittgenstein by Hyman bear closer examination. The first doctrine ('the expression of a religious belief in words is not a prediction or a hypothesis, but ''something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference''') might be traced to such passages as these, from *Culture and Value*:

> **Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: not, however, because it concerns 'universal truths of reason'! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly).**[3]

> **[F]aith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence.**[4]

> **I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*.**[5]

There is also, of course, the passage that Hyman actually quotes, which is worth giving at greater length:

> **It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference.**[6]

It is worth noting immediately that in the last quotation given Wittgenstein is describing how things strike him, not necessarily how they objectively are, and that instruction in a religion (and out of one, I would argue) involves not only description but also an appeal to conscience. In other words, this is presented as a personal opinion about what it takes to change someone's religious beliefs, not a neutral grammatical remark of the kind that make up properly Wittgensteinian philosophical works. This opinion might be quite correct, or even logically necessary, if it captures the grammatical essence of religious instruction. Even so, according to this very view, mere description (which is what properly Wittgensteinian philosophy offers) cannot change someone's belief. This implies that philosophy cannot be prescriptive in matters of religion, as I will argue below.

What now of the second doctrine, which asserts that religious beliefs can be neither verified nor falsified? Where does Wittgenstein say this? He comes close in a couple of places. One is in his 'Lectures on religious belief', where he says that:

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'Reasons [for religious beliefs] look entirely different from normal reasons.... They are, in a way, quite inconclusive. The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business'.[7] And, 'Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science.... I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable'.[8] There is also Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on ethics', which concludes that: '[T]he tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language'.[9] Religious language, he suggests, is 'mere nonsense', in which no belief could be either verified or falsified.[10]

Clearly, then, Hyman's interpretation of Wittgenstein is not groundless. However, it would be much too hasty to conclude that Hyman is right about Wittgenstein's view of religion. For one thing, none of the sources I have quoted, indeed none of the sources that I *could* have quoted in which Wittgenstein talks directly about religion, is a reliable guide to Wittgenstein's settled and mature thought on what philosophy can say about religion. The 'Lecture on ethics' is a fairly early work (1929), and later sources at least suggest that Wittgenstein came to think of religious language as being perfectly capable of meaning. The 'Lectures on religious belief', as we have them, are just notes taken by students. Other relevant sources include *Culture and Value*, a collection of Wittgenstein's thoughts on various topics, philosophical and otherwise, his notes on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and his conversations with O. K. Bouwsma.[11] We clearly need to be careful in distinguishing Wittgenstein's personal opinions, and his meta-philosophy, from his ideas about what, if anything, philosophy itself tells us all to believe.

Wittgenstein's personal opinions might be extremely interesting, but they are not philosophy as he understands it. For instance, Emyr Vaughan Thomas has distinguished between some religious beliefs and what Wittgenstein might call 'the *genuine* religious spirit'.[12] This 'genuine' or 'authentic' form of belief is strongly appealing, but it is no part of Wittgenstein's philosophical approach to prescribe such a faith, as we shall see later.

We should also distinguish from his personal opinions any half-formed or later-rejected beliefs. The best way to do this, it seems to me, is to look at Wittgenstein's most finished philosophical work, especially as found in the *Philosophical Investigations*.[13] This is what I will do in the following section.

As a brief aside, though, it is worth pointing out that David G. Stern, who emphasizes the importance of Wittgenstein's unfinished and unpublished work, comes to a relevantly similar conclusion to the one I will reach here. This conclusion, as we will see below, is that Wittgenstein's work is not directed towards or against other people's views. Rather, Wittgenstein, at least in his later work, is engaged in a struggle with his own intuitions and convictions. The point of publishing these 'private conversations', as Wittgenstein calls them, is to demonstrate his method for dealing with problems of this kind.[14] The only possible criticism of religious beliefs that we should expect to find in Wittgenstein's philosophy, therefore, is of one's own beliefs, and then only if these beliefs have the

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characteristics of philosophical confusion. Philosophy does not tell us which religious beliefs, if any, we should or should not have.

Wittgenstein's avowed method and purpose in philosophy

According to Wittgenstein's pronouncements in the *Philosophical Investigations* about what philosophers should do, Hyman's account of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion is surprising. For one thing, Wittgenstein famously maintains that philosophy should not advance doctrines or theories at all, but should instead describe uses of language. See, for instance, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109, where Wittgenstein writes that: 'we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place'. See also §128: 'If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.'

Furthermore, as implied by the last quotation, properly Wittgensteinian philosophy does not tell people what they can or cannot say, although it might well influence what is said. See *Philosophical Investigations*, §79: 'Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them there is a good deal that you will not say.)' The descriptions that philosophy provides are supposed to consist of statements that we would all accept. It is doubtful that the Pope, or any Christian fundamentalist, would accept the doctrines attributed to Wittgenstein. Hyman himself does not.

Believers who reject these doctrines are classified as not religious but superstitious by some Wittgensteinians, and perhaps would be by Wittgenstein himself. Such pejorative labelling clearly goes beyond the bounds of properly Wittgensteinian philosophy, though. This criticism has been levelled against D. Z. Phillips by Brian Clack.[15] In his defence, Phillips maintains that he uses the word 'superstition' in a non-pejorative sense to describe practices that are confused. To say that a practice is confused, when it genuinely is so, is not prescriptive, according to Phillips. 'Clack finds this disingenuous', though, he notes.[16] Clack's view is understandable. 'Confusion' is almost as clearly pejorative as 'superstition'. However, Phillips's position is not as wrong-headed as it might seem. His claim is that some practices really are confused, and that if philosophers bring this out in their Wittgenstein-inspired descriptions of such practices, then so be it. They have not thereby violated Wittgenstein's methodology or, indeed, gone beyond the kind of thing that Wittgenstein himself wrote, as we shall see.

All the same, it is clear that anyone describing a religious practice as confused is not saying something that we would all agree with, unless the 'we' here excludes the practitioners of the religion in question. Perhaps Wittgensteinian philosophy could be done in a self-consciously parochial way, but this is not what Phillips takes himself to be doing. Someone might, of course, be led to see and acknow-

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ledge that he or she had been confused without realizing it by way of a series of steps, none of which involved saying anything the subject did not accept. However, calling the person confused would not be part of any of these steps, and so not part of the method Wittgenstein offers us, even if the belief that the person is confused is either the motive for, or the conclusion of, the application of Wittgensteinian therapy. Moreover, a claim that a person is confused is only acceptable to Wittgenstein if the subject accepts it, or would accept it. It is hard to say with confidence when this would be, unless the subject is oneself. There is, then, a real problem about applying Wittgenstein's method (which aims, roughly, to remove confusion without contentiousness) to religion.

I see three possible responses to this problem. One is that Wittgenstein contradicts himself, a possibility we should not exclude, but not the most charitable interpretation, so not the first to take up. The second is that philosophers might show a practice to be confused without ever saying that it is. This is not what Phillips does, though, nor what Wittgenstein himself seems at times to be doing. The third possibility is that expressions of Wittgenstein's personal opinion have been mistaken for philosophical remarks by his exegetes. Our examination of the contexts from which Wittgenstein's 'doctrines' are derived suggests that this might be the real answer to the problem.

In the much more reliable *Philosophical Investigations*, as we have seen, Wittgenstein clearly implies that the only theses philosophers may advance are those with which everyone would agree. Philosophy's job is description, not theorizing or hypothesizing. The description should, if done properly, be inarguable, and should lead to a sense of de-puzzlement in oneself or one's interlocutor, just as psychotherapy is only successful when accepted as such by the patient. (The point here is that philosophy is *like* psychotherapy in this regard, not that philosophy is itself a kind of psychotherapy.) On this, Wittgenstein's ideas seem to have changed little since the 'Big typescript', in which he says: 'One of the most important tasks is to describe all the blind alleys of thought so vividly that the reader says ''Yes, that is just what I meant''. To hit off exactly the features of every error … . You see, it *is* the right expression only if he recognizes it as such.'[17] Not only this, but philosophical therapy can only work when the subject feels that he or she has a problem. It may be that 'Human beings are profoundly enmeshed in philosophical – i.e. grammatical – confusions',[18] but philosophical work is pointless without a receptive audience. The passage just quoted ends with this sentence: 'So you can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language; you cannot help those whose entire instinct is to live in the herd which has created this language as its own proper mode of expression.'

It is somewhat surprising that Wittgenstein regards contented speakers of ordinary language as in any philosophical sense confused, but part of his point is surely that philosophy is wasted on such people. (I would be inclined to argue that the very concept of a practice excludes the possibility of a confused practice, but

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this is irrelevant to the present discussion.) The important points for now are that Wittgenstein regards philosophy as useful only for certain people, to relieve them of mental cramps, and can only work if the people in question accept as correct the descriptions that philosophy offers them. Even a brief and crude description of some widespread religious beliefs will show that Hyman's doctrines are not the banal reminders of undeniable truths that Wittgenstein wants us to use in doing philosophy.

Four theological stereotypes

Let me say a little here about theology, or kinds of religious belief, and especially kinds of Christian belief. I am interested here not in a general categorizing of religious beliefs. Rather, my aim is to point out some of the different kinds of beliefs that are held about the relations between religion, science and philosophy. We can think of four stereotypes: the fundamentalist, which insists on a literal interpretation of religious beliefs and texts; the existentialist, which treats religion as something to which science and logic are irrelevant; the rationalist, which regards proper religious belief as being entirely compatible with logic and science; and the postmodern, which is similar to the existentialist, but more ironic than passionate, perhaps because of a kind of philosophical self-consciousness. Let me define these stereotypical theologies further in terms of their relations to the usual means to truth (science and philosophy) and to literalism. For the fundamentalist, religious truths are truths of the same kind (but not importance) as any other: all truths are literal truths, and science and philosophy are potential rivals or enemies (e.g. creationist attitudes towards evolution). For the existentialist, religious truths are literally, i.e. really, true, but they are not true literally, i.e. when taken as scientific or philosophical truths. Science and philosophy are completely distinct areas of thought and/or life. For the rationalist, religious truths are, at least sometimes, not to be taken literally. When they should be is determined, at least in part, by science and philosophy. Philosophy, science, and religion are partners, albeit perhaps unequally, in the search for truth. Finally, for the postmodernist, religious truths are not literally true and therefore are immune from criticism from scientific or philosophical sources.

This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of the variety of religious belief, but it is instructive nonetheless. It is instructive because, as simplified as they may be, these positions are recognizable and yet the Wittgensteinian position Hyman outlines is incompatible with two of them: the fundamentalist and the rationalist. Contrary to the first Wittgensteinian doctrine, a fundamentalist might insist that the Bible contains both predictions (about the Day of Judgement, say) and hypotheses (the creation story, perhaps). These predictions and hypotheses differ from others not in kind, the fundamentalist will say, but in being certainly true. Both the fundamentalist and the rationalist will disagree with the second

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Wittgensteinian doctrine, which says that religious beliefs cannot be verified. Fundamentalists believe in the possibility, at least, of empirical confirmation of the truth of the Bible, and rationalists believe that God's existence can be proven logically. Plainly, then, these allegedly Wittgensteinian doctrines say more than what everyone would necessarily agree with, even if no actual person held these views. However, fundamentalism is common, and the rationalist position is at least close to the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (and very close to the doctrine of Father O'Hara). Hyman's Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion seems to force the religious believer into either an existentialist or a postmodern mode of belief.

It might be objected that the stereotypes I have outlined are not only simplified but also superficial. What the fundamentalist, for instance, *says* is different from what the postmodernist says, but the meaning might be the same, or the postmodernist might simply see and state more clearly what the fundamentalist tries to say in his or her confused way. This (or the equivalent for rationalists or existentialists) might be true of any particular fundamentalist. But we cannot say, 'Here is what your words mean, here is what you do', and, 'Look! They do not fit. You are confused'. The meaning of fundamentalist claims, according to Wittgenstein, *is* (at least to a large extent) their use in practice. So the meaning and use of religious language cannot be compared or contrasted straightforwardly.

Still, one might try to push the fundamentalist who regards belief in science to be merely part of the 'religion' of secular humanism, say. We might point out that scientific and religious beliefs come about in different ways. But this does not guarantee that the fundamentalist will accept that religion and science are importantly different. Judgements of importance are evaluative and not grammatical. Christians can argue among themselves about the rights and wrongs of fundamentalism, but grammatical investigators cannot. Nor can Wittgensteinian philosophers dictate what counts as religion, or as Christianity. Ordinary language is the guide on such questions, and ordinary language recognizes fundamentalism and rationalism as kinds of religious belief. Similarities and differences between various beliefs can be observed, but the individual conscience is then free to believe as it will. Nothing is ruled out absolutely.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes: 'When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.'[19] Such exclusion, he says, 'bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason'.[20] If certain combinations of words are withdrawn from use for various reasons, we may expect that these reasons will not always apply. In this case, no sentence will be absolutely nonsensical. Which we call senseless will depend on our purposes. If the 'liberating word'[21] is the one that brings us peace, so too the sentences to be excluded from our language are those that cause trouble. Which these are cannot be specified a priori. It is

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therefore un-Wittgensteinian to argue against, say, proofs of the existence of God. We might share Wittgenstein's suspicion that those who want to speak (in favour) of such things are suffering from some illusion, but (a) Wittgenstein does not (even try to) prove that such things are impossible or nonsensical – although he might ask about what was meant; and (b) if we do not know what certain believers mean, then we cannot be sure that they mean nothing, or that nothing will satisfy their desire to call *something*, say, 'proof that God exists'.

This is one reason why philosophy, or grammatical investigation, is best practised on oneself or on friends. As James Conant has written, 'Whether someone's belief is (properly termed) religious will show up in the way it informs the entire character of that individual's life.'[22] We cannot know the true nature of a person's belief, or describe it accurately, unless we know the entire character of that individual's life. Sayings or sentences cannot be analysed out of the blue. It makes a difference who says them. Thus O. K. Bouwsma records:

> **August 7 [1949]**
>
> **On Thursday evening we met at Black's. It was my turn to introduce the subject. I introduced: *Cogito, ergo sum*. After I had finished, W[ittgenstein] took it up. 'Of course, if ____ now told me such a thing, I should say: Rubbish! But the real question is something different. How did Descartes come to do this?'**[23]

Wittgenstein was very interested in the audience for his work in his teaching and writing. Beth Savickey observes that, 'Anyone could attend Wittgenstein's gatherings … but it was not possible to do so anonymously.'[24] She also points out that in his 'Sketch for a foreword' Wittgenstein indicates that he is 'really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe'.[25] His grammatical remarks will not work on people who are not thinking in the way he is thinking. Whatever his diagnosis of Western civilization, he aims his therapy at a few individuals only, and not necessarily the best (or worst), merely those like himself, 'because they form my cultural milieu, my fellow citizens as it were, in contrast to the rest who are *foreign* to me'.[26] Wittgenstein's target is Wittgenstein and his ilk, not Aquinas, Descartes, or Billy Graham, except insofar as they are like Wittgenstein.

Implications for understanding and applying Wittgenstein's work

It looks as though the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*, then, would reject the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion that Hyman outlines. But is this the end of the matter? It is hard to see how it could be. Wittgenstein surely would, after all, describe scientific language and religious language differently. The rules for their uses are different, as are the contexts in which they are used (at least sometimes). This might not always have been true, and it might not be true in the future, but there are differences between science and religion. A fundamentalist

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would surely disagree. Similarly, it is hard to imagine Wittgenstein the philosopher (and certainly not Wittgenstein the man) accepting any logical proof of God's existence. Yet the rationalist does. So what is the Wittgensteinian philosopher to say to such people? I will consider three plausible alternatives, of which only the last, I will argue, is truly Wittgensteinian.

The first idea is that philosophy (as advocated by Wittgenstein) could be a tool for cleaning up religion. One might try to criticize such fundamentalist doctrines as 'creation science' by criticizing its claim to be good science, or attack rationalist theology by criticizing the logic of any attempted proof of God's existence, say. If we accept that only what is called science is science, then we can reject creation science as pseudoscience. In this way creationism as a form of religious belief is undermined (I do not say destroyed). We might criticize an Anselm or a creationist for confusedly believing that he or she has a certain kind of justification for his or her faith. And with logic we might undermine the faith of the defender of any unsound argument for the existence of God (unless he or she embraces unreason or mysticism in response). It seems, then, that some religious beliefs do, or could, have foundations that science or philosophy could prove false. If it is part of someone's religious belief that such belief can be verified, then such belief can, in principle, be falsified, contrary to the second Wittgensteinian doctrine.

This first attempt at a Wittgensteinian approach would reject such confused parts of religious belief, leaving behind a kind of post-philosophical residue. When creationists or Calvinists or Thomists try to justify their beliefs and attitudes philosophically we would combat this error, but otherwise leave them free to believe whatever they like, or whatever they can. This, I think, is close to what Wittgenstein had in mind (although it would not be part of his philosophical therapy to say such a thing). It is hard to see, though, how a rationalist Catholic, for example, could comfortably remove all the philosophical, or foundationalist, ideas from her religion and leave only the religious ones behind. (Unless we essentialize religion as existentialist or postmodern.) Moreover, it seems impossible from a distance to say in any generalized way just what is a philosophical belief and what is a religious belief, as we have seen. This first attempt at a Wittgensteinian conception of the philosophy of religion is flawed, then, but something of it is preserved in the third version, discussed below.

Before that, let us consider a second kind of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. If Wittgenstein's conception of what philosophy should be is not a useful instrument of reform, perhaps he would say that the philosopher should be more objective, more phenomenological in a sense, and simply describe what people believe and do. The people called scientists say this, the people called creationists say that. Anselm says this, Wittgenstein says that. If this is so, then we must distinguish between the philosopher *qua* logician and the philosopher *qua* philosopher. We can only describe what people say, what we observe, and then see what beliefs emerge or survive this process. This sounds disturbingly relativistic,

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if not pointless, and it raises the question: Just who is the philosopher who is neither theist, nor atheist, nor logician, nor scientist, etc.?

Moreover, people who argue that creationism is in fact science, or that the existence of God can somehow, either logically or scientifically, be proved are precisely the kind of people who are likely to insist that belief in God or creation would be groundless without the proof they offer. What must we, as philosophers, say in response to such an assertion? Must we just accept it, patronizingly, as in fact part of a particular religious view, despite the protestations of the believer to the contrary? I do not think we can, since to do so is in fact not to accept it but to refuse to listen to it. This is precisely what is patronizing about the stance I am considering.

Paul Johnston has written that:

> **[W]hile believing in God involves a reaction on the individual's part, one cannot infer from this that it is merely a question of his reacting in a certain way. Rather, part of the content of his reaction is the claim that it is the response to an independently existing reality: hence if one treats it as merely reflecting a human reaction, one thereby expresses one's own rejection of the claim that God exists.**[27]

We cannot, as Wittgensteinian philosophers, say that believing in God is merely a certain kind of reaction, because part of what it means to believe in God is to deny that it is merely such a reaction. Some religious belief might, upon investigation, be seen to be nothing more than a certain reaction to the world. But we would have to do the investigation first before asserting that this is an accurate description of any particular religious belief, and it is no part of Wittgenstein's method of philosophical investigation to make such contentious claims.

This brings us to the third and final possibility that I want to consider. The only way out, the only way for genuinely Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion to have value, seems to be if the audience is oneself, or a few like-minded people, and just looking attentively, describing anthropologically, has value either in itself or in making certain claims to belief undesirable. I suspect that this is the truly Wittgensteinian view. Wittgenstein suggests that accurate description might have intrinsic value when he writes, 'For me … clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves'.[28] The idea that such description might make some beliefs undesirable or psychologically untenable is suggested by *Philosophical Investigations*, §79, which says that 'when you see [the facts] there is a good deal that you will not say', but also that you may 'say what you choose'. What one chooses to say after all the facts are in will surely vary from one individual to another. Philosophy is paradigmatically a kind of dialogue (hear the various voices in the *Philosophical Investigations*) but also primarily a working on oneself. It could be done with another, but only if he/she were willing. And then the application of Wittgenstein's method(s) would be, like psychotherapy or religious conversion, an individual matter.

This reading of Wittgenstein is supported by Caleb Thompson's reading of the

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Philosophical Investigations as a confessional work. According to Thompson, Wittgenstein's work is confessional in terms of both style and content. The style is confessional, says Thompson, following Stanley Cavell, because 'in talking about ordinary language, in talking about what we say, I am inevitably saying something about myself, about what *I* say'.[29] The content of Wittgenstein's philosophy is also like confessional work because in it he is explicitly wrestling with temptation, fighting against the urge to misunderstand language.[30] Support for this reading of Wittgenstein can also be found in his comment from 1931 that: 'Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)'[31] If I am right, then in a truly Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, creationism, foundationalism, the ontological argument, and so on, would not be attacked *per se*. Rather, the individual concerned would be questioned, offered statements with which to agree, and so forth, until, perhaps, some light dawned and the fly saw the way out of the fly bottle. This can only be a personal process, though, and there can be no part in it for generalized hypotheses or conclusions about religion in general, of the kind Hyman describes. Hyman might well be describing the views of certain Wittgensteinians, but not, I think, those of Wittgenstein himself.

Particular cases

I am suggesting that we distinguish between (at least) two Wittgensteins: Wittgenstein the philosopher, concerned with removing philosophical puzzlement by means of grammatical description, and Wittgenstein the man, concerned with the decline of passion and seriousness in the Western world. We have to make this distinction if we are to take seriously Wittgenstein's remarks about the nature and purpose of philosophy done on his terms, and it is a distinction that makes a certain intuitive sense. I am not sure how well the distinction can be maintained, especially given Wittgenstein's ideas on the ethical nature of philosophical problems, but we ought to try.

What, then, are we to make of Wittgenstein's work on religion? Do not the following remarks of his prove me wrong?

> **Operations which depend on a false, overly simple idea of things and processes are to be distinguished from magical operations. For example, if one says that the illness is moving from one part of the body to another, or takes precautions to divert the illness as if it were a liquid or a condition of warmth. One is then creating a false picture for oneself, which, in this case, means a groundless one.**[32]

> **To drive out or slay death; but on the other hand it is represented as a skeleton, as itself dead in a certain sense. 'As dead as death'. 'Nothing is as dead as death; nothing is as beautiful as beauty itself'. The picture in terms of which one conceives of reality here is such that beauty, death, etc. are the pure**

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> **(concentrated) substances, while they are present in a beautiful object as an admixture. 'And do I not recognize here my own observations about 'object' and 'complex'?**[33]

> **The scapegoat, on which one lays one's sins, and who runs away into the desert with them – a false picture, similar to those that cause errors in philosophy.**[34]

Let me explain what is seemingly problematical about these passages. The first passage (hereafter passage 1) describes what sounds like some sort of magical or religious view or practice and calls it false, which is hardly the kind of universally-acceptable description I have said we should expect from Wittgensteinian philosophy. The second passage quoted (passage 2) compares the European lenten rite of 'carrying out death', which involves removing an effigy from the village, with philosophical errors identified by Wittgenstein in his earlier thinking. So must not there be an error in the rite? In the third passage the idea of a scapegoat, which, as Clack and Frazer point out, has been important in many cultures, is labelled false.[35]

I cannot comment individually on every such passage, but I have chosen three as representative of those that seem most awkward for the view I am trying to advance. They are not, I think, as awkward as might at first be thought, especially if we consider their original contexts. Passage 1 is from the *Remarks on Frazer*, which need not be read as a philosophical work (or indeed a finished work at all) and, more importantly, does not call any religious or magical practice or belief false. Wittgenstein is distinguishing magic from bad science, not calling magic a form of bad science. As Wittgenstein says earlier in the same set of remarks:

> **It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it was based. But this happens only when calling someone's attention to his error is enough to turn him away from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error.**[36]

The acceptance of a false picture, as described in passage 1, clearly involves an error. In a religious practice, though, there is (can be) no question of error. The kind of talk of an illness moving from one part of a body to another that Wittgenstein has in mind in passage 1 is not, then, religious or magical talk. It is also worth noting, I think, that passage 1 refers to one doing something for oneself, not a practice shared by a people or culture. At any rate, there is no need to read a criticism of any magical or religious practice or belief into this passage.

Passage 2 comes from the same remarks, so some of what I said about passage 1 also applies here. Furthermore, the point of the passage seems clearly to be a criticism of a particular metaphysical theory, not any religious view. It might be maintained that if metaphysics is criticized by being compared to magic then magic is being implicitly criticized. This is not so, however. Magic is fine, Wittgenstein seems to think, as long as it is recognized as such. The problem with metaphysics is that it has delusions of being something else. It is also not a practice

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in the relevant sense. There is nothing like a religious practice based on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. If there were, the status of its propositions would change.

As for passage 3, I think the context of this remark, and therefore its purpose, need to be borne in mind. The remark is one of many about philosophy, not religion or magic. Wittgenstein is saying that philosophical errors often arise from false pictures. Admittedly, he also implies that there is something wrong with the idea of a scapegoat, but his remark is not primarily about the scapegoat ritual and is addressed, presumably, to those who neither practise nor believe in such a ritual. Given the point Wittgenstein is here making, if someone objected to his pejorative remark about scapegoats he would withdraw it and use a less objectionable example. It is also worth noting that this remark did not make it into the *Philosophical Investigations*, unlike many of those from the same set of notes, and so we should not assume that Wittgenstein himself was entirely happy with it. As with all of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion, it is important to remember that he says what he says 'for a particular purpose'.[37] If Wittgenstein had been focusing on the scapegoat ritual in this remark, no doubt he would have expressed himself more carefully. In the *Remarks on Frazer* the criticism is all of Frazer's interpretation of religious and magical practices and beliefs, not of those practices and beliefs themselves, although of course Wittgenstein probably shared in none of them. Similarly, in the 'Lectures on religious belief' Wittgenstein is out to correct philosophers' misunderstandings of religious belief, not to attack or defend such belief itself. When he talks about references to the 'eye of God' as uses of a picture, he is concerned to make clear that he is not thereby belittling or criticizing such references. Of the user of the expression 'eye of God', Wittgenstein says, 'If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say'.[38] He goes on a little later as follows: 'All I wished to characterize was the [consequences] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant'.[39]

If it is only acceptable to say that someone uses a picture when the person himself would admit as much, then surely it is only acceptable *when discussing scapegoats* to say that the scapegoat ritual involves a false picture if the practitioners of this ritual would admit as much, which they surely would not. In other words, it is no part of Wittgenstein's philosophy to maintain that any religious belief or practice is false (or superstitious or confused). Hence Wittgenstein's remark that the advantage of his philosophy 'is that if you believe, say, Spinoza or Kant, this interferes with what you can believe in religion; but if you believe me, nothing of the sort'.[40] Philosophical therapy cures, if anything, philosophical problems, not religious ones. A person's religious beliefs might be infected with philosophical confusion, but if so, all the true Wittgensteinian can do is to offer helpful remarks and see whether these are accepted. They most likely will not be, unless the individual in question feels confused. What works, if

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anything, will vary from individual to individual, although of course certain remarks might be found to be more generally useful than others.

However, there can be no place here for sweeping generalizations about what is, or is not, nonsense. Whether an assertion makes sense, and what sense it has, is shown by the work it does, or does not do, in someone's life. There is no combination of words ('proof of God's existence', for instance) that could never have a use in a person's life. Nor is there any that is always used meaningfully. This is why, given Wittgenstein's ideas about what philosophy should be, there can never be Wittgensteinian doctrines about religion.[41]

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed.), compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 53.
2. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 154.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, G. H. von Wright (ed.) in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, Peter Winch (transl.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 32e.
4. *Ibid*., 33e.
5. *Ibid*., 53e.
6. *Ibid*., 64e.
7. Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 56.
8. *Ibid*., 57–59.
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions* 1912–1951, James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds) (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1993), 44.
10. *Ibid*., 42–43.
11. O. K. Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations* 1949–1951, J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit (eds) (Indianapolis IN, Hackett, 1986).
12. Emyr Vaughan Thomas 'Wittgenstein and Tolstoy: the authentic orientation', *Religious Studies*, **33** (1997), 363.
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe (transl.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
14. Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, 77; quoted in David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.
15. See Brian R. Clack 'D. Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and religion', *Religious Studies*, **31** (1995), 111–120, especially 113–119; and Brian R. Clack *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1999), 122–123.
16. D. Z. Phillips 'On giving practice its due – a reply', *Religious Studies*, **31** (1995), 123.
17. Ludwig Wittgenstein from 'The big typescript' (MS 213), Anthony Kenny (transl.), in *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 265.
18. *Ibid*., 272.
19. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, §500.
20. *Ibid*., §499.
21. Kenny *The Wittgenstein Reader*, 264.
22. James Conant 'Putting two and two together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the point of view for their work as authors', in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (eds) *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 266.
23. Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations* 1949–1951, 12–13.
24. Beth Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation* (London: Routledge, 1999), 59.
25. Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, 6e, quoted in Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, 60.
26. *Ibid*., 10e.
27. Paul Johnston *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy* (London and New York NY: Routledge, 1989), 113.

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28. Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, 7e, quoted in Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, 41.
29. Caleb Thompson 'Wittgenstein's confessions', *Philosophical Investigations*, **23** (2000), 3.
30. See Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.
31. Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, 16e.
32. Ludwig Wittgenstein 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in *Philosophical Occasions* 1912–1951, 125.
33. *Ibid*., 135.
34. Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophy' (from 'The big typescript', MS 213) in *Philosophical Occasions* 1912–1951, 197.
35. See Clack *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, 123–125.
36. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions* 1912–1951, 121.
37. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, §127.
38. Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 71.
39. *Ibid*., 72. The original passage has 'conventions' instead of 'consequences', but from the context this seems clearly to be a mistake.
40. Quoted in G. E. M. Anscombe 'What Wittgenstein really said', *The Tablet*, 17 April 1954, 373.
41. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology meeting in Atlanta, GA on 20 April 2000. I am grateful to several members of the Society for their helpful comments and questions. I am grateful also to the Editor of *Religious Studies*, and to T. P. Uschanov, Anthony Rudd, and an anonymous reader for this journal for useful suggestions for improving the paper.

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