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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retreats to monasteries, he had not, to that point, had any religious belief.

By the time Gareth came to Blackfriars, I had left Oxford to teach in Liverpool. But I kept an Oxford base for the vacations and we met regularly until the mid nineties. We were not in much contact when he was in Belgium and had just resumed normal dining and drinking engagements when he fell ill. We kept in telephone connection until his death.

During our long friendship, we discussed many things, most commonly connected with religion. (My views are those of a rather conservative 'anglo-catholic'.) But we did not often discuss philosophy. There was one reason for this. Wittgenstein is a philosopher who divides people, and Gareth was a root and branch Wittgensteinian, whereas Wittgenstein has always struck me, from first reading, as being more or less a fraud.

The matter is not quite that simple, however. There are two grades of involvement in Wittgenstein. This is especially true of religious philosophers. The first grade is represented by those described by Antony Flew as treating Aristotle, Aquinas, Frege and Wittgenstein as the four evangelists of the philosophic church. This group could be epitomised by Anscombe, Geach, Dummett, Christopher Williams and Brian Davies. Ideologically, the view is that the anti-private language argument (Wittgenstein) clears away the 'modern' errors of Descartes and the empiricists, leaving the field to an earlier and more traditional metaphysic (Aristotle and Aquinas), fortified by the discoveries of modern logic (Frege).

The deeper involvement with Wittgenstein, however, is more radical and, from a religious point of view, sinister. The supporting figures are Hume, Kant and the logical positivists. (Perhaps the last are not often openly acknowledged by Wittgensteinians, because they want to put a distance between Wittgenstein and the positivists. Gareth, however, starts *Believing in God* by introducing a character, Otto, who has strongly empiricist and materialist views and is presumably named after Otto Neurath, a major figure in the Vienna Circle. Otto is taught how to understand religious language — how the word 'God' is used — consistently with retaining his original, positivist, account of what is factual.) This pedigree guarantees the rejection of all traditional metaphysics, not just the supposedly aberrant subjectivism of the 'moderns', represented by Descartes and the empiricists. This is the Wittgensteinianism of D. Z. Phillips and the 'Swansea school', and Peter Winch. Because of the acceptance of Hume and Kant's critique of metaphysics, no religious statements can be accepted as descriptively true, on a par with descriptions of the physical world and the statements of science. Rather they have an entirely different function, being, roughly, expressions of value and attitude towards the world. This is the view Gareth adopts in *Believing in God*. Such radical positions are normally associated with an extreme liberal Protestantism, and with people who are hanging onto belief by their finger tips, and probably on the way out. By contrast, Gareth's commitment was to a full-blooded religious life, and I would guess that the



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Wittgensteinian position may very well have played a role in bringing him back to belief. My aim in this essay is to face up to something I did not face up to in his lifetime, because I found it an embarrassing question, namely, how could someone whose religious commitment and spirituality seemed so firm adopt a position that any normal orthodox person would regard as equivalent to atheism. A mutual College friend of ours, on recently reading *Believing in God*, expressed the view that Gareth had not found the right vocabulary to express what he really believed. I want to look at what someone whose faith seems inwardly very robust might be trying to say in expressing himself in a way that seems to deprive that faith of all substance.

## II

Perhaps I should begin by backing up the claim that the extreme Wittgensteinian position Gareth adopted seems to undermine religious belief. According to that theory the word 'God' is not a name or referring expression:

> We speak of God in the absence of anything (any thing, person) that is called God...Rather the word "God" is used in unusual ways. In particular, establishing the presence of anything that we might call God is irrelevant to our speaking of God, since there is nothing that we might call God...[T]he presence of God is not the presence of a thing (or person) called God, a thing undetectable because invisible, intangible, bodiless. There is not one more thing in the universe than atheists think. On the contrary, for Christians no such extra thing could count as God. (19-20)

One might try arguing that Gareth here is merely making the point — perhaps in an over-emphatic way — that God is not just 'a thing amongst things' or just 'another thing', but is of an entirely different order: he is, for example, 'pure being', not 'a being', as a Thomist might express it and, hence, not 'in the universe'. But this is not all that he means, as is shown by the way he talks about poltergeists, discourse about which he compares to discourse about God.

> We talk about the presence of a poltergeist, if we do, not because we detect an invisible agent, but because we detect no agent at all. The presence of a poltergeist is not the presence of a thing, albeit an invisible one, called a poltergeist. "Poltergeist" is not related to poltergeist as name to object: it is not the name of a thing. So we do not infer a causal relationship between one object, a flying cup, and another one whose presence could be established independently. If nobody threw it, and there are no other discernable causes for its movement, like a sudden earth tremor or hurricane, then it was a poltergeist, by definition. (89-90)

Gareth does not think that it is a question of fact whether certain motions are caused by poltergeists. If objects move in certain ways without explanation, that is what it is for there to be a poltergeist. Just look at the way



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*the word is used.* There is no possibility that these paradigm uses could embody a mistake. Similarly, what it is for God to exist is shown by the way people talk about Him. These paradigm uses could not be wrong. Though it might happen that we stop talking that way. Both 'poltergeist' and 'God' are essentially names for absences, not for real agencies. (Gareth labours this point in chapter 3, 'The importance of not being something'.)

The essentially materialist framework in which this approach to discourse is set, can be seen in Phillips' approach to the religious notion of immortality:

> I do not think that the possibility of the survival of disembodied spirits after the death of human bodies, or in the possibility of non-material bodies living on after the death of material bodies or *the possibility of bodies resurrecting after death*, are...necessary presuppositions of a belief in the immortality of the soul. (*Death and Immortality*, 18: my italics)

For Phillips, the very notion of a literal survival of death, however understood (and he covers all the options above) is nonsense:

> ...if we hear that someone has survived his death, we do not know what to make of these words. (1-2)

The contrast between Wittgensteinianism of this sort and positivism is the following. A positivist treats metaphysics as a form of discourse which is meant to be literally true but is in fact meaningless. The Wittgensteinian thinks it was never meant to be factual. Rather in the way positivists treat ethical statements as emotive, not true or false, religious discourse is attitude-expressing. (So, too, is talk of mental states. As Wittgenstein remarks in Part II, (iv) of the Investigations: 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.') It is a mistake to think that these languages were ever meant to be referential, and this is a mistake that much orthodox metaphysics and the positivists themselves both make. The crucial point is the denial of all referential force to terms such as 'God' and 'pain'. It is claimed that consideration of the way these words are used shows that their function was ever meant to be referential.

## III

The positions so far sketched can be summarized in three propositions.

(1) The criticism of metaphysics. Hume, Kant and the positivists are taken to have shown that the subject matter of metaphysics is unreal and facticity is restricted to the domain of the spatio-temporal, the physical, the empirically verifiable.

(2) Negative consequences. It follows that it is impossible to treat as descriptive, or factual, or literally true whole areas of common discourse: for example, the ethical, and the religious.

This leaves one with the need to have some version of



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(3) Positive proposal concerning metaphysical language.
This can take any of the following three forms.
(3a) Dismissal of traditional metaphysical language. All those discourses that are non-factual are strictly meaningless and should be dropped.
(3b) Revision of our understanding of traditional metaphysical language. In order to preserve these discourses, which still have some use, one must deflate them, and interpret them poetically and emotively, though this is not — or not the whole of — how they were traditionally understood.
(3c) Defiant acceptance of the anti-metaphysical conclusion. Nobody but certain deluded philosophers ever thought these forms of language were meant to be factual. They were always different kinds of use of language, and the attack on metaphysics has merely made this clearer to philosophers. The normal users of first order discourse were never deluded.

These approaches might be applied differently to different forms of non-empirical discourse. A simple logical positivism tends towards (3a), but even its proponents are hesitant to apply the nihilistic conclusion to ethics. For that case alone they tend to accept either (3b) or (3c). (It is perhaps fair to say that it can, in general, be unclear whether (3b) or (3c) is being adopted.) I think it would be fair to say that Braithwaite in 'The faith of an empiricist' and Don Cupitt in most of his writings go for (3b) for religious language. They are saving what they can from what they regard as an essentially successful anti-metaphysical onslaught. Phillips and Gareth adopt (3c) for religious language. This is why Gareth was upset at being described by one reviewer of *Believing in God* as the first Catholic defender of Cupitt. The suggestion sometimes made by followers of the latter that we should drop talking about God for a few years did not appeal to him, but not because he thought God was something in our ontology. It was because he thought we were never meant to have thought that He was.

I am simply going to assume in this brief essay that no-one who has an orthodox Christian faith can accept the non-realist construal of religious language expressed in the above propositions, whichever version of (3) one adopts. The fact that this fact seems so obvious to me explains why I found discussing philosophy with Gareth such a delicate business. It seems to me that if someone with real faith thinks they understand it in this way, they are putting a mistaken theoretical gloss on their inner belief. I want to consider what someone who makes this mistake might be trying to get at — what true, or, at least, plausibly true notions might be motivating them.

I can see two possible candidates. One is to interpret the Wittgensteinian spirit as an expression of apophaticism. The other is what I shall call the introversion of religious belief.



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## IV

Apophaticism. This interpretation of the Wittgensteinian spirit can be expressed in the same framework as I used above.

(1') The criticism of metaphysics. Hume and Kant (Kant is especially important in this case) and the critical tradition have shown that there is no positive, intelligible account of any reality beyond the realm of the spatio-temporal, the physical, the empirically verifiable. It does not follow from this that there is no reality beyond the empirical, only that it is beyond our concepts, whether employed in a simple literal way or in some systematic analogical fashion.

(2') Negative consequence. There can be no abstract or theoretical account of, or gloss on, the nature of the noumenal 'more' that falls beyond the empirical.

(3') Positive account. This noumenal element can only be characterized by the use of language as it operates in a 'form of life'; that is, as interpreted against the backdrop of human practices. This use of language is rather like its use in liturgy, but without a theological interpretation, except for the conviction that the language as used in the context somehow does characterize a transcendent reality.

The contrast between this interpretation and the more radical one rejected above comes in one's attitude towards permitting a Kantian noumenal reality to survive the critique of metaphysics. The radical empiricist position characterized in the last section rejects the idea of this independent extra element. The difference between the positivistic and the Kantian approach to Wittgenstein can be brought out by considering different ways of using his maxim that 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul'. The more 'reductionist' way of taking this is that the human soul is no more than the human body set in a certain context — treated as a person, not just as a body. The less reductionist, more apophatic, way is to take it as meaning that, though there is literally more to the human being than his body, we have no way of characterizing this 'more' except to see it as a kind of projection of the body, treated in a human fashion. On this latter interpretation, treating a living body as a person reflects a reality about people that is in no way dependent on our social forms, but is a real metaphysical truth about their nature. It is a metaphysical truth, however, to which we have no other access and no other way of characterization than through the drama of human life. There is no theoretical — literal or analogical — characterization of transcendent reality, only a picturing which cannot be given a further theoretical gloss.

This approach has an appeal, though I doubt whether it is finally coherent. It does not fit well, however, with what Gareth actually says. The last sentence of the book is

> We may say: People do not discover religious truths, they make them. (287)

This is at the end of an explanation of how one might come to take part in



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the religious practices of an initially alien civilization. Believing is simply a matter of certain practices being natural for one, not believing is a matter of not feeling at home in a practice. And any further issue of truth does not arise. In saying that religious truths are 'made' not 'discovered', Gareth seems to be denying the independent noumenal reality affirmed in (1'). He also seems to be affirming a radical relativism. At least one can say that the picture presented in (1') to (3') is quite compatible with the idea that some dramatic representations of the inscrutable reality are more true to it than others. In that sense, the truths are discovered (or revealed!) not made.

## V

Introversion. Both the positions considered so far rest on the claim that the arguments of Hume, Kant, and others, discredit traditional metaphysics. This view was widely accepted by philosophers during the twenty years or so that followed the second world war, but is much less commonly held now. This, of course, does not mean that it is not true. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see why someone with orthodox convictions should now feel intellectually obliged to give them an unorthodox gloss, simply because of the criticisms Kant and others raised. So Gareth's adoption of the radical Wittgensteinian position does not seem to be adequately motivated by (1) or (1') above. There is something which could be a more forceful motivation, however, and that is the desire to preserve the introvert nature of religion.

There is a natural religious impulse to think that religious truth should not depend on external contingencies. Whether something is a religious truth should be a matter that can be decided by looking inward. It should not be a matter of whether some complex metaphysical argument works, whether the best physics says the universe had a beginning or whether certain events happened hundreds of years ago. Whether something is a religious truth should be a matter for the heart or for the spiritual life. There can only be spiritual tests of spiritual truth, not scientific, philosophical or historical tests. In fact, this is how most people live religiously. Gareth shows that he sympathizes with this intuition in one of the reasons he gives for rejecting the traditional 'realist' approach to metaphysics in favour of the 'form of life' account which sees God as an 'absence' not a 'thing. He says

> ...it avoids all the difficulties and obscurities of the traditional 'arguments for the existence of God', and it avoids putting Christianity on such shaky foundations as might be provided by these arguments. (41)

This remark could be applied not just to such arguments as the traditional 'five ways', but to anything which involved treating religious truths as 'factual', for all such factuality can be contested on non-religious grounds.

The appeal of Buddhism has much to do with the priority it seems to give to spiritual practice over contentious doctrinal content. In fact, amongst most



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of its western followers, the practice seems to have entirely consumed any metaphysical content. Very few of them seem to take any beliefs — including that in reincarnation — seriously. The fruits of the spiritual life are self-justifying, but not in the sense that they present evidence for the literal truth of some doctrine, but in the sense that they become the only significant content of the doctrine itself.

As an interpretation or use of Wittgenstein, this 'introvert' account of religious truth has its difficulties. Although his followers sometimes want to play this down for certain purposes, his fundamental emphasis is towards the public, the social and the behavioural. The 'inner life' is a reflection of the outer, not an autonomous source of meaning. In that sense, Wittgenstein is part of what Jung identified as the extravert spirit of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the treatment of religious language as an autonomous 'language game', not in any essential way dependent for its justification on sciences rooted in other discourses, achieves something similar to the retreat into inwardness.

Whatever its appeal, this introversion of religious truth fits ill with the historical and incarnational nature of Christianity. In fact, it turns both these features into metaphors, not real facts. It also seems to me not to do justice to the many levels on which intelligence, including in its religious moment (if this kind of division is proper at all), operates when considering one's understanding of life. No sort of consideration is irrelevant, nothing is simply autonomous. There is a kind of division of labour within the Christian community and within the individual soul. Simple belief does not concern itself directly with arguments, but intelligence cannot honestly avoid engagement with issues that go beyond the enclosed mentality of belief.

## VI

Conclusion. I have considered three interpretations of the Wittgensteinianism that Gareth expresses in *Believing in God*. The radical and 'reductive' (in a loose sense of that difficult term) one, an apophatic one and an introverted one. The second and third can be combined. The introverted myth-making of the third could be the way of characterizing the noumenal realm postulated in the second. Perhaps by putting these two together, one could present an alternative to the nihilism of the first approach. Whether such a thing could ever amount to Christian orthodoxy, I do not know. I still feel very disturbed by Gareth's choice of philosophical medium.



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