

WITTGENSTEIN AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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Theology is the study of the nature of God and His relationship to man, and rational inquiry into religious truth. Such a study necessarily involves the use of language in its development and communication because language is the principal instrument of communication. Thus the analysis of religious language can reveal a great deal about the nature of the experiences that gives rise to theology. If we look into Wittgenstein's approach in theology we will find that the basic function of theology is the analysis of its own language. To understand his point it is important to make a distinction between the *philosophical* and *dogmatic* theologians. The function of philosophical theologians is to analyze what sort of thing one is doing when one does theology; while the dogmatic theologians would be said to do theology.

Wittgenstein's "*Philosophical Investigations*" is the primary source to understand his concept of religious language. There is only one reference to religion and/or theology in this work (# 373) "*Grammar tells what kind of object a thing is (theology as grammar)*".

Wittgenstein conceived of the function and purpose of philosophy as the *analysis of language*. In his own words:

"Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning

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the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. — Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an “analysis” of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart.”¹

The reason for stressing the analysis of language as the essence of philosophy is really quite simple. Wittgenstein did not think that the problem of understanding experience has its source in the nature of experience. The problem has its source in our attempt to understand (conceptualize) and communicate our experience. He thought that we would understand and communicate our own experience and the experience of others better if we paid more attention to the ways in which we talk about such experiences.

For Wittgenstein, the uses and functions of language were the beginning points for understanding. These uses and functions form the very structure of experiences and daily living, and thus Wittgenstein conceived of them as “the given” or “forms of life”.² In another passage he refers to the various rules for the use of language as “bedrock” and thus beyond any sort of ultimate justification.³

One of the unique characteristics of Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy is his conception of philosophical problems as *diseases*. When the philosopher begins to analyze language he begins to notice how many philosophical problems are literally produced by an unhealthy and negligent use of ordinary language. These problems, or “illnesses,” are “cured” by the philosopher through a clarification of the mistaken use of language. “The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.”⁴

There are two simple, but fatal, mistakes in the philosophical use of language which Wittgenstein singles out. First, “A main cause of philosophical disease — a one-sided diet: one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example.”⁵

Here he would seem to have in mind a tendency among many philosophers to conceive of, or to define, a particular word according to a given pattern or presupposition, and then to conclude that this word or concept must always correspond to this definition. One might suggest Spinoza's definition of "substance" and the logical positivist's conception of "meaning" and "truth" as examples of this "one-sided diet".

Second, there are misunderstandings caused by analogies between the forms of expression. Thus, three sentences may be similar in grammatical form, such as "The book is red," "The man is good," and "The soul is immortal," but dissimilar in logical function. To insist that all sentences of the same form must have the same logic is as naive as to insist that all currency of the same denomination has the same international value.

The philosopher's function is to *cure* these basic diseases and problems. Such a cure is affected by analyzing the many varieties of language structure and function, and then making precise distinctions among them which will serve as reminders for future use. These various language structures are illuminated by likening them to the structure and rules of games. Wittgenstein's writings are replete with very simple "language games" which reveal much concerning how and why language functions as it does.

These philosophical problems, which Wittgenstein also referred to as "mental cramps", are solved, not only by supplying answers, but by restating and thus eliminating the problem.

Although the analysis of language is an extremely complex activity (and because of the constant growth and change of language, one that will never be completed), there are basic guidelines which Wittgenstein suggested. One is that the meaning of a word or sentence is defined in terms of its use. This principle is embodied in the most often quoted motto of Wittgenstein's followers, "Don't ask for meaning, ask for use." In Wittgenstein's own words:

"One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to

remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is a *stupid* prejudice.”⁶

By distinguishing the ways in which the word is used, and the situations in which it is accepted or rejected, one comes to an understanding of what the term means. “Essence is expressed by grammar.”⁷

Another helpful guideline for the analysis of language which Wittgenstein suggests, and which is really implied in the above suggestion, is that meaning is determined by the rules of the various, overlapping language “games” or regions. Each language could be represented as a vast, inter-related network of words and sentences. Each region of this network develops out of, and is tied down to, a specific area or aspect of experience. Each region develops somewhat independently and thus has its own rules, or grammar. There are, however, many similarities or “family-resemblances” among their individual grammars. The philosopher must be careful not to be misled by these similarities into thinking that they all operate in the same way. At the same time, these grammars do have things in common, especially their grounding in experience, and these need to be kept in mind also. These grammars, rules, or “forms of life” are the final justification for our particular conceptualizations and communications:

“How am I able to obey a rule?” — if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justification I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”⁸

A corollary to the above stated principle is that no one set of rules has universal priority. That is to say, one cannot insist on applying the rules of one region of language in all regions. This would be similar to insisting on applying the rules of English grammar to all other languages. There simply is no aristocracy or hierarchy of language functions and rules, hence there is none for meanings either. *What may be “meaningless” within one language structure may be very meaningful within another,*

depending on the purpose and grammar of the individual sentence in question. As Wittgenstein himself says,

To say: "This combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be a part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for. *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.*⁹

The ultimate justification which can be given for any standard of meaning and truth within a language structure is a pragmatic one. One goal of language is the communication of information, and thus both formal consistency and material correspondence are necessary to this end. However, there may be other functions of language as well, and indeed there are, which necessitate different standards. Commands, questions, rituals, and poetry are all important and depend upon other standards for achieving their purpose. One other outworking of this approach bears mentioning. It would seem that according to Wittgenstein's approach, truth, as well as meaning, is determined by use. Agreement in the use of a statement within a "region" of language, or according to "forms of life", becomes the standard of truth. Thus truth will vary in accord with the different purposes and functions of language.¹⁰

If philosophy is conceived of as the analysis of language, where does this leave theology? Of course, some would reply, "*It leaves theology right where it always has been — completely unaffected by changes of emphasis within philosophy.*" Although this point of view is very influential among theologians today, it is a retreat from intellectual difficulties and hence as theologically irresponsible. It is always worthwhile for the theologian to

consider the implications of the developments in philosophy for his own field of study.

If one were to follow a Wittgenstein approach in theology, the very least that could be said is that one of the primary functions of theology would be *the analysis of its own language*. As it has been mentioned earlier that theology is the study of God and his relationship to men, so such a study involves the use of language in its development and communication. Thus the analysis of theological language can reveal a great deal about the nature of the experiences that give rise to theology. It would be helpful to distinguish between the philosophical and dogmatic theologians at this point. The latter could be said to “do theology” while the former’s function is to analyze what sort of thing one is doing when one does theology. Thus both types of theologians are important.

Whereas the philosophical theologian used to focus his attention upon such problems as the existence and nature of God, immortality, evil, and revelation, he would now have an additional task – that of analyzing and clarifying the nature of religious language. This is not an additional task in the sense that he would now use language analysis as the means of solving and, in many cases, eliminating the above stated problems. The “analytic theologian” would devote himself to the examination of the “forms of life” of religious experience and expression. *His main task would be to clarify the grammar and meaning of theological language, not to justify it.*

Coming at theology in this way would cause the theologian to feel that many of the great debates and problems of historical theology are really pseudo-problems which arose because of an insensitive use and inadequate understanding of language. Theologians, like philosophers, have been misled by the grammatical similarity between religious statements and scientific or literary statements. To be sure, many of the former do function like the latter in certain ways, but there are also basic logical differences which have very often been overlooked.

Undoubtedly the analytically oriented theologian would find that his major contribution to the solving of theological problems would be two-fold. *First*, he would distinguish and analyze the various ways in which people actually do talk about the issue involved, and attempt to show what the logical and empirical implications of these ways of talking are. This then would leave the individual to choose the way of talking which actually says what he wants to say, which of course would eliminate a great deal of confusion in both the thought and talk of that individual.

Second, the analytic theologian would, on occasion, be able to solve a theological problem by restating it and thus showing it not to have been a problem at all. The first contribution clarifies the positions of a debate so as to point out the nature of the disagreement more precisely. This second contribution would have the effect of showing the debate to be a semantic one, and thus eliminating the disagreement altogether.

Now the question arises; what sort of thing will the analytic theologian discover about theology by focusing his attention on its language? If Wittgenstein's approach were applied fairly thoroughly, it would seem to follow that the meaning of theological expressions is defined in terms of their use. Theological and religious words and statements do not come with a pre-packaged, *a priori* meaning which people must discover. Rather, people have experiences and purposes which they express by means of verbal and written symbols, and which must be understood through observing and analyzing the use of these symbols.

The only reference in the *Investigations* to religion or theology is the following: "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is" (Theology as grammar).¹¹ This, of course, fits in smoothly with Wittgenstein's teaching that meaning is really determined by the rules, or grammars, or the various, overlapping language "games", or regions. Although how one uses various symbols is an entirely individual and arbitrary matter, it is imperative that they be used according to the rules of the language that is being spoken if one desires to communicate. Wittgenstein has shown that there are different "grammars" among the various functions of language within the very same

geographical language, such as English, German, etc. *Scientific terms and statements have a different grammar than do poetic and logical ones. Moreover, each of these has different "sub-grammars" all of which are similar and dissimilar in varying aspects. Even the languages of science, poetry, and logic have certain "family resemblances"*.

All of this would indicate that the grammar of theological language would have certain similarities and peculiarities in relation to scientific, poetic, and logical language. In addition, it would have many sub-grammars corresponding to the great variety and complexity of its purposes. It is at this point that one needs to be reminded to avoid a one-sided diet. It may well be impossible to state that religious language has any one basic nature. Even the claim that it is entirely unique is a form of one-sidedness, since it obviously has much in common with other forms of language. Furthermore, it must be maintained that no one function of religious language is any more important than the others. The importance varies with the purpose.

Another important and traditional function of the philosophical theologian is to determine the truth-value of theological and religious language. It almost goes without saying that the traditional arguments for God's existence and nature will be abandoned by the analytic theologian. The main reason for this abandonment is the modern insight that these arguments are logical proofs and as such are irrelevant to questions of existence. Theological statements must be related to logic only in the sense that they must be internally consistent.

In the contemporary literature on this subject there seem to be two basic points of view. Some thinkers, such as William Hordern, Michel Foster and William Zuurdeeg, maintain that theological language must have its own unique method of verification. Others, such as Ian Ramsey and John Hick, hold to a basic continuity of empirical verification between religious language and the assertions of ordinary language.

There is a great deal of value inherent in this approach to philosophy. Many of the good parts of the history of philosophy

have been those which were concerned about the nature and use of language. At the same time, many of the bad parts have been those which lacked this concern. This approach has also served to do away with the confusion between the function of science and philosophy.

Moreover, many philosophical problems have been illuminated, solved, or eliminated by the rigorous application of this approach. Wittgenstein himself, especially in the Blue and Brown books,¹² has been of real service in this respect. In addition, many others have taken up the challenge and are at present producing helpful literature in the field. The more outstanding of these are J. L. Austin, John Wisdom¹³ and Max Black.¹⁴

There are, of course, those who remain skeptical about the value of such an approach. Perhaps the most often heard objection pertains to the assumption that "ordinary language" is to be taken as the standard for meaning and truth. Another related question is often asked, "Does how we talk settle how things are?" Wittgenstein's reply to both of these criticisms is by means of a simple question, "What other standard is there? What else can one mean by 'standard'?"

In my opinion Wittgenstein is right. If the way we talk in various ordinary circumstances is not to be taken as the standard for meaning and truth, what other standard is there? Indeed, does the objection really have meaning? Is it not like asking for a logical justification of logic to ask for a justification for using language as the norm for meaning and truth? Both meaning and truth would seem to be defined in terms of agreement of language.

One word of caution needs to be added concerning the soundness of this approach to philosophy. Many language philosophers seem to forget that semantics, *i.e.* the relation of words to objects, is every bit as important as syntactic, *i.e.* the relation of words to words, in determining the use, and thus the meaning, of various statements. The criteria for establishing the appropriate use of a statement are both experiential and logical.

There is, nonetheless, just as great a need for philosophical theologians to *analyze* what sort of thing is being done when theology is being done.

The nature of theology is discovered in its language. Its problems are primarily problems of finding the correct words to express the type of experiences involved in religious experience. It is the job of the psychologists, historians, and sociologists to determine what has happened. It is the job of the dogmatic theologian to summarize and deduce the implications of what has happened. Then it is the job of the analytic theologian to determine how these endeavors can best be expressed. If many of the problems of theology are in its language, then it is natural to anticipate many of these to be solved or dissolved by means of a detailed analysis of the language.

The question of theological meaning would seem to be settled best in terms of language use and rules. There are many instances when the meaning of a religious statement will need to be fixed on the basis of the rules governing logical definitions. Kai Nielsen has shown the importance of these rules for theological talk. There are instances when the meaning of a religious statement must be determined on the basis of rules governing empirical assertions. Here John Hick's concept of "eschatological verification"¹⁵ is extremely helpful. There are other occasions when meaning will need to be fixed by reference to the rules governing directive, or imperative expressions. R. B. Braithwaite (1900-1990) has explored this aspect fairly carefully.

One thing is clear with regard to determining the meaning of religious language: no approach will be satisfactory which does not leave room for all kinds of sub-grammars within the broader sets of rules. Religious language involves all sorts of statements, and each must be given its proper value and place. This is especially true with regard to the empirical type of religious statement, since there is a tendency among some writers to ignore this possibility.

Finally, a word concerning the question of the truth-value of religious language. As was mentioned earlier, there are some

thinkers in this area who seem to think that religious revelation, and thus theology, brings its own criteria of truth with it. While it is a fact that religious statements very seldom yield to a simple scientific or logic validation, it is important to remember that the concept of self-authentication is beset with serious epistemological difficulties. Indeed, it may be that the concept does not even make sense.

The odd thing about those who claim that theology has its own method of verification is that very often they never bother to mention just what this method is. When they do make some suggestions along this line, they turn out to be the conventional criteria of coherence, correspondence, internal consistency, and pragmatic fruitfulness dressed up in new terminology. This position also runs the risk of making religious truth so distinct from the other aspects of human experience that it becomes quite irrelevant.

For myself I am more impressed with those who would maintain a basic continuity between religious truth and truth as it is known in everyday experience. This, of course, leaves room for "truth" in the sense of literary, existential, and esthetic truth, but it does not permit a wholesale substitution of this sense of truth for the empirical sense of truth. Unless religious language grounds itself in the concrete facts of human experience, it can lay no claim to the concept of truth at all.

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- 10 *Ibid*, p. 86, # 224.
- 11 *Ibid*, p. 116, # 373.
- 12 Published by Basil Blackwell, Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations".
- 13 Wisdom and Austin, *Symposium: Other Minds*. Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XX, pp. 122-187.
- 14 Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*. Cornell University Press, 1962.
- 15 "The idea that if I will live on after my death then I will realize this is true when I die."