Non-cognitivism in religious faith and language
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When we talk about God, what do we mean by what we say? Is religious language similar to talking about the ordinary world around us? For instance, if I say 'the door is in the corner', this can be true or false. Can religious statements, such as 'God is love', also be true or false? Or is religious language more like an *expression* of how we feel or what we are committed to? If you think that religious language is just expressive, and doesn't state any facts, you are a 'non-cognitivist' about religious language. ('Cognitive' comes from the Latin *cognitio*, meaning knowledge. If there are no religious facts, there is no religious knowledge.)

Kierkegaard
Kierkegaard argues that we are wrong to think of religious beliefs in the same way as other beliefs. Religion is not a type of philosophical system, and we shouldn't weigh up religious beliefs in a philosophical way. Instead, faith is characterized by passionate commitment; beliefs formed 'objectively' are not, they may have no impact on one's life. To believe that God exists, but to treat this as just another fact, about which we feel nothing, is not to have faith. Faith isn't (just) a matter of what, but of *how*, we believe. The commitment that characterizes faith requires a decision, a 'leap'; it is not something that can be established intellectually. This leap actually *requires* objective uncertainty: 'If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty'.

Some philosophers argue that reason can't determine whether God exists because God wants us to have this type of committed, passionate relationship with him. If we felt we knew the answers, something would be lost. Kierkegaard emphasises the importance of this: objective certainty will not have the same impact on one's life as faith in the face of uncertainty.

Although Kierkegaard says that faith is 'incomprehensible', he is *not* arguing that it is irrational. He remarks that we 'cannot believe nonsense against the understanding, which one might fear, because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder [us] in believing it'. If faith were just nonsense, reason would inhibit our ability to leap. Faith lies outside the limits of reason, but reason can recognise that it has limits.

Kierkegaard believes that there are facts about God, but that we cannot know these facts using reason. Religious belief must involve an emotional response, and so religious language is expressive, rather than merely fact-stating. Kierkegaard is half-way between cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

Wittgenstein on language
Wittgenstein attempted to illuminate the nature of language by comparing language to games. There were several lessons he wanted to convey by the analogy, in particular: 1) like games, language is an activity guided by rules – in games, rules governing what one can do, in language, rules governing meaning; and 2) meaning is learned from the rules governing the use of the word/sentence, like 'pieces' in a game are understood by how they can be used. Meaning, then, is often not a matter of *description*, but a matter of *use*. Appreciating this requires a distinction to be made between *surface grammar* and *depth grammar*: words or sentences that in one context describe objects or an event may be similar to ones that in another context that do nothing of the sort (e.g. 'the peace of the Lord passes understanding', 'the chariot of Mark Anthony passes the throne'). To understand a particular 'piece' of language, one must look at how the language is

used, as meaning is not given by words and the form of words alone. Wittgenstein lists as examples of language games asking, thanking, cursing, praying, greeting, and so on.

The idea of language games, then, emphasises both the potential differences between superficially similar words and sentences; and the foundation of language in activity. Wittgenstein says that a language game is the speaking part of a form of life. Some philosophers have inferred that forms of life are therefore as various as language games, but it would be a mistake to identify each of the examples above with a distinct form of life. Wittgenstein's point is rather that any language game is (the spoken) expression of a form of life. But a form of life is far broader than any specific language game, the foundation out of which language games grow, the collection of cultural practices which embed language games. Wittgenstein often emphasises the biological basis of our form of life – the many natural reactions that human beings have that form the basis for language games (e.g. pain behaviour and pain language). But the biology is always taken up in a particular culture, and what is 'natural' is often only natural within a particular way of living as a human being. Language games, then, have their basis in human nature, which always takes a more determinate cultural form than what is laid down by biology alone.

Wittgenstein on religious faith and language
The central implication of the theory of language games and forms of life is that language games do not need any justification. They are rooted in natural human reactions and activities. If then, religious language is a particular, distinctive language game, we need to understand what is distinctive about it in order to understand what it claims and implies, and to understand that, as religion is a natural human response and activity, its claims need no justification.

Is religious language a particular language game, however? If asking, cursing, praying, greeting, and so on are examples of language games, we do all these things in religious and secular contexts. A game appears to be a piece of linguistic activity that can operate in different contexts. The context provides how we are to understand the 'game' – talking to God is not like talking to another person. Religion seems to 'broad' and 'big' to be a language game in its own right. On the other hand, it is not a whole form of life, for it is always situated in and among many other human practices (see below). Seeing it as a distinctive part of a distinctively human form of life is a better interpretation.

However, I think that religious language can be seen as a language game. First, Wittgenstein identifies many linguistic practices at different levels of generality as games; he even identifies language itself as a language game (here we may perhaps correlate the language game to the form of life; very different languages may arise from different cultural expressions of human nature). Second, as a result, whether something counts as the 'same game' itself depends on the context. So 'asking' is a game; but asking your boss for a raise and asking God for prosperity could well count as different games. Religious language, though it contains the many different games of praise and worship, prayer, miracles and so on, can be understood as forming a game governed by particular rules – those displayed in the analysis of its depth grammar.

Wittgenstein argued religious language has a depth grammar quite distinct from its surface grammar, and the latter should not mislead us to compare it to the claims of science. 'God exists' is not a statement about a *thing*, an *object* that exists as part of the world like natural objects do. It is not a claim about an entity at all: 'a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation." (*Culture and Value* 64) This can illustrated further by religious talk of the Last Judgement. This is not a hypothesis about a possible future event; if it was, it would be utterly bizarre (what's the evidence? how is such a belief formed?). The Last Judgement is a 'picture', an understanding of life by which the believer is guided through life. Religious language, then, is expressive of an emotional attitude and

understanding of life, not descriptive of the way the world is. To understand religious language is to understand the place of certain claims in the life of the believer and religious community. The place of such claims in believers' lives, e.g. the absolute nature of faith, the distinctive morality they support, shows that these claims are not factual.

As such, religious claims, e.g. the existence of God, neither needs *nor can be given* support by argument. *Any* language game cannot be criticized by standards of rationality that are external to that game. As religious claims are not empirical hypotheses, they are not susceptible to 'proof' by evidence and rational argument.

Phillips on religious faith and language

Philosophers have criticized this account of religious faith and language, particularly in terms of the implications they believe it has. One key defender of the Wittgensteinian line, D Z Phillips, outlines and responds to some of the most popular, including 1) Religious beliefs are logically cut off from all other aspects of human life; 2) Whatever is called religious language determines what is and what is not meaningful in religion; and 3) Religious beliefs can't be criticised. It is easy to see how such an interpretation may be formed from what Wittgenstein says about religious belief; but Phillips argues, rightly, that these interpretations erect a straw man. However, we shall see that there are things we often want to say about and in response to religious claims that Phillips and Wittgenstein declare is simply nonsense.

The first objection confuses the autonomy of language games (their 'rules of representation' – the rule that determine the meaning and legitimacy of claims within the game) with total isolation, perhaps through the misunderstanding that religion is a distinct form of life. But language games are part of a form of human life: 'Religion has something to say about aspects of human existence which are quite intelligible without reference to religion: birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune, and misfortune. The connection between these and religion is not contingent' ('Religious Beliefs and Language Games'134). As a result, if religious claims make no sense in the light of such experiences, e.g. if a believer denies the existence of suffering, we will rightly reject them. This also demonstrates, in response to the third objection, the type of criticism that religious belief may be open to.

But this does not mean that such connections furnish grounds for *justification* or refutation of religious beliefs. Religion cannot be criticised on the grounds that it is *not true* or highly *improbable*; for this presupposes that it makes factual claims, and it does not. Religious beliefs may also be criticised from within religion. There are standards of correctness within religious language that govern what may or may not be said, laid down, Wittgenstein and Phillips argue, by theology. But, in response to the second objection, it is not religious language – if this is thought of in isolation – that lays down meaning; it is religious practice, the place of religious claims in the lives of believers. And we have seen that not anything can be believed, not anything can be lived.

Phillips develops his account by drawing a strong distinction between genuine religious belief and language and superstition. If someone thinks that prayer or ritual is a means to attaining some end, as one might go about things in a secular context, they have misunderstood the nature of religion, and their belief has become superstition. Likewise, if someone believes that 'God' is the name of an entity in the world or that God is logically prior to religion, this is a 'monstrous illusion' (the phrase comes from Kierkegaard), for the meaning of religious language is taken from religious practice, and is not a deviant form of scientific hypothesizing.

Objections

Although Phillips' response to rationalist critics is robust, his arguments illustrate the very tendencies that worry them. If religious language is expressivist, both non-cognitive and non-descriptive, then many of the cosmological claims that religious believers have genuinely wanted

to make through the ages must be labelled superstitious. Whether or not this is a correct judgement, it is certainly a *contentious* one, and it is difficult to see how the Wittgensteinian line is not a *critical reinterpretation* of religious belief, rather than an account of it. It is curious how, in defending religious faith against criticism from 'external' standards, this interpretation uses a different standard – a standard of what constitutes meaning – that may be seen equally external to (and critical of) religious faith, at least in many popular forms.

Second, much of the defence appears to rest on the idea that because religious beliefs are regulatory, they cannot be descriptive. But there is no reason (as yet) to think that they cannot be both. Must the rules that govern a language game assign just one function to the uses of words within it? We might draw a parallel here with emotivism in ethics. Just because the emotivist is right to point out the emotive meaning of words does not entail that the realist is wrong to think they do not also have a descriptive meaning.

Third, our typical understanding of doctrine is changed. The explanation of the symbolism of ritual in terms of doctrine must (eventually) be the wrong way around. For doctrine is said on this view to take its meaning from ritual. And doctrine becomes much less important (something Wittgenstein explicitly argues). As we cannot understand how some more esoteric aspects of the nature of the Trinity can be expressed in our lives, so such esoteric debate fails to be a true expression of religious belief.